

Housing, Shelter, and Safety: Needs of Street-Level/Survival Sex Workers in Ottawa

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Sandy Hill Community Health Centre
(*OASIS*)

Ottawa Community Housing
Harmony House

Shepherds of Good Hope
(*Brigid's Place*)

Canadian Mental Health Association
POWER

Carlington Community Health Centre
(*Daisy's*)

The Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa
Minwaashin Lodge (*STORM Outreach*)
Carleton University

Ottawa Police Service

Youth Services Bureau
City of Ottawa

The John Howard Society of Ottawa
(*Windrose Supportive Housing*)

St. Joe's Women's Centre

Somerset West Community Health Centre
(*NESI*)

University of Ottawa

PACT-Ottawa

Crime Prevention Ottawa

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	5
Introduction	10
Part I: Literature Review and Scan of Best Practices	12
Homelessness in Canada	12
Needs of Homeless Women in Canada & Barriers to Shelter and Safety	12
Housing First and the Plan to End Homelessness in Ottawa	15
Sex Work & Stigma	15
LGBTQ2S+ Experiences of Sex Work & Homelessness	16
Youth Experiences of Sex Work & Homelessness	17
Housing for Sex Workers: Problems with Current Approaches	18
Housing for Women Sex Workers: Some Successful Models and Strategies	19
Housing and Community Services for Sex Workers: Best Practices	20
Peer Support	22
Summary of Literature and Best Practices	23
Part II: Local Scan – Ottawa	24
Responding to the Needs of Street-Level/Survival Sex Workers in Ottawa	24
Identified Needs and Barriers to Housing Supports and Services in Ottawa	27
Basic Needs	27
Safety & Privacy	28
Social Supports	28
Health Care	28
Addiction & Mental Health	29
Resources for Women with Children	29
Waitlists and Accessibility	29
Stigma & Discrimination	30
Shelter Rules and Policies	30
Culture & Identity	31
Police	31
Staff, Funding & Resources	31
Identified Best Practices	32
	2

What is Working in Ottawa?	33
What is Missing in Ottawa?	36
Next Steps	37
Part III: The Research Project	38
Peer Researchers	38
Ethics	38
Recruitment	39
Focus Groups and Interviews	39
Participation	39
Challenges	40
Gaps in Recruitment & Potential for Future Research	41
Collaborative Analysis	41
Part IV: Key Findings	42
Demographics	42
Overview of Key Findings	45
Accessible/Affordable and Well-Maintained Housing	46
Low-Barrier, Supportive/Transitional Housing	47
Housing for Women and Women-Led Families	50
Protection from Housing Takeovers	51
Relationships with the Police	53
Incarceration and Criminal Records	55
Outreach and Community Supports	56
Access to Healthcare	58
Neighbours and Neighbourhood	59
Part V: Summary and Conclusions	63
Part VI: Recommendations	65
References	68
Appendices	73
Appendix I – Focus Group Guide	73
Appendix II – Interview Guide	74
Appendix III – Demographic Questionnaire	76
Appendix IV – Consent Form	79
Appendix V – Peers	82

Executive Summary

The Context

In June 2014, Crime Prevention Ottawa [CPO] organized a conference to bring together “individuals, groups and organizations interested in promoting safety in the sex trade”¹ (Kwan 2014a: 2). Representatives from a variety of organizations collaborated with residents and sex workers to discuss the immediate concerns amongst street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa. The top priority identified in the [Conference Report: Safety and the Sex Trade](#) was “**safe, affordable housing and safe houses for sex workers**” (ibid: 9). After the conference, a Steering Committee formed to facilitate a research project on housing, safety, and sex work. The mandate of the study was to research and document the housing-related safety needs of sex workers in Ottawa and to make recommendations for action. The methodology and findings of this research project (including recommendations) are presented in this final report.

As part of the **hidden homeless**, street-level/survival sex workers are an extremely vulnerable, marginalized, and underserved population. Many are living in unsafe situations (in stairwells of buildings, camping in the forest, living with drug dealers, etc.) and do not often access traditional shelter or housing services in the city. While there are no official data on the exact number of street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa in this report, what we know from service providers and peers is enough to warrant attention to this group of women. For example, Daisy’s Drop-In alone – a service in the Carlington area – has connected with 54 street-level/survival sex workers over the past two years.

A lack of affordable, accessible, and safe housing in Ottawa serves only to further marginalize street-level/survival sex workers. Due to this deficit in housing, Ottawa must develop housing programs that meet the needs of women experiencing homelessness/housing instability. Service providers suggest that an important first step in filling this service gap is **listening to and involving sex workers** in future program development and delivery.

The Approach

The research project occurred in three phases: I) a literature review of the housing/safety needs of survival sex workers in a broader Canadian context; II) a local scan informed by Ottawa-based service providers who identified promising practices as well as gaps in service; and III) a focus-group and interview phase where street-level/survival sex workers spoke about their experiences of safety and homelessness/housing instability in Ottawa. Major findings from all three phases point to the intersecting barriers to housing that converge for street-level/survival sex workers; the success of low-barrier, person-centred approaches that work to meet survival sex workers “where they are at”; and the need to prioritize and coordinate greater access to service models of this kind.

¹ This report uses the language of “sex work” and “sex worker” except when quoting directly from other sources where different terminology may be used (e.g. “sex trade,” “sex trade worker”).

Data Sources

The three-part project offers a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Phase I was grounded entirely in the literature; Phase II and III were informed by the knowledge of service providers and women with lived experience of street-level/survival sex work. All processes, findings, and recommendations were also reviewed by the project's Steering Committee, which had representation from women with lived experience, frontline service providers, Ottawa Police, and the funding organization – Crime Prevention Ottawa.

Both peer researchers and service providers were instrumental in facilitating connections with street-level/survival sex workers, because of their strong community ties. Peers and service providers also helped ensure the methods were appropriate to the community and that the research recommendations were valuable.

Findings

Importantly, the findings in all three phases of the project were congruent with the literature and the insights of service providers, foreshadowing what we would later hear when speaking to women with lived experience. The major findings indicate a need for:

- **Affordable & Well-Maintained Housing:** A major theme discussed by every project participant, and reinforced by the literature, was the overall unaffordability of well-maintained housing which oftentimes forced women to trade sex for a place to stay or necessitated reliance on abusive partners for shelter.
- **Low-Barrier, Supportive/Transitional Housing:** Across Canada and within Ottawa, successful housing models are those that meet women “where they are at” and do not present prerequisites such as the absence of mental health and substance use issues for access to this type of housing.
- **Housing for Women and Women-Led Families:** Though only two women spoke about currently raising young children, others discussed adult children who were in their lives. Unfortunately, some housing models force women to live removed from their family networks and do not recognize the totality of their personal and familial bonds.
- **Protection from Housing Takeovers:** A significant finding of this project was women's experiences of eviction due to so called “housing takeovers.” Because street networks are very tightly knit and people hold strong allegiances to one another, many women felt guilty for not sharing their housing when others remained without. Often invited guests overstayed their welcome, stole from women, or created disturbances in the building, causing women to be evicted.

- **Better Relationships with the Police:** Women were not unanimous in their feelings of safety regarding the police. Overall, younger project participants were less positive in their assessment of the police, whereas older women said relationships had improved over time. Study findings indicate trust can be built through dedicated time and investments, as demonstrated through the success of police liaison programs.
- **Evaluation of the Impact of Incarceration and Criminal Records on Access to Housing:** Many street-level/survival sex workers have histories of incarceration and/or criminal records. During periods of incarceration social assistance payments are halted, putting women at risk of eviction. Once women have criminal records it becomes increasingly difficult to find new housing, as many landlords require criminal record checks as a condition of tenancy.
- **Additional Peer-Led Outreach and Community Supports:** Project participants described a broad range of experiences related to outreach and community supports. Many women were not connected to any formal services and expressed frustration about their inability to get connected. Others frequently accessed formal supports, like those offered by outreach and drop-in programs, and even described these programs as “family.” Peer support was highlighted as a crucial part of the continuum of care.
- **Better Access to Healthcare:** For street-level/survival sex workers, stigma and discrimination are barriers to proper healthcare. Moreover, women sex workers are limited in their ability to access healthcare—especially in unfamiliar neighbourhoods—because they tend to be strongly rooted to particular urban areas which lack transportation, and/or experience stigma when moving through the city. Women were more likely to seek healthcare supports from multi-purposed agencies they already know and trust (e.g. NESI, Daisy’s Drop-In, or Brigid’s Place). These places offer non-judgemental, sex worker positive healthcare that has made notable differences to women’s overall health and wellbeing.
- **A Focus on Neighbours and Neighbourhood:** The importance of community connectedness for women was a major finding of the project. Women overwhelmingly felt safe in a limited number of places, and rarely ventured further from these comfort zones. The importance of amenities (e.g.: grocery stores and other shops, social services, community centres) to a neighbourhood was emphasized repeatedly.

Recommendations

This three-phased community-based research project gathered data from literature, service providers, and from women with lived experience. These sources collectively highlight several issues facing street-level/survival sex workers in terms of safety and housing. Overwhelmingly under-housed and living in poverty, street-level/survival sex workers are at increased risk of violence and poor health. They are forced to sleep rough, couch surf, or stay with abusive partners. Aware that access to decent and affordable housing is correlated to levels of safety and wellness, the City of Ottawa has implemented a 10-year plan to end homelessness. Yet, there is still more work to be done specific to women experiencing homelessness, especially those involved in street-level/survival sex work. Below are ten recommendations specific to this research project that, if implemented, will assist street-level/survival sex workers to increase safety and wellness.

<p>Low-Barrier, Supportive/Transitional Housing</p>	<p>We recommend additional low barrier, supportive/transitional housing across the city – specifically in areas across Ottawa that are currently underserved. Brigid’s Place has been identified as a promising housing model for women involved in street-level/survival sex work.</p>
<p>Expansion of Services and Drop-In Centres Across Ottawa</p>	<p>We recommend that financial support be directed to programs across Ottawa that are currently supporting street-level/survival sex workers but whose resources are quite limited (e.g. Daisy’s Drop-in and Purple Bridges²) and that these services be expanded to other areas of the city where street-level/survival sex workers live (or stay) and work.</p>
<p>Peer Outreach & Peer-Led Programs</p>	<p>We recommend that all future programs and initiatives related to the housing and safety needs of sex workers in Ottawa place peers at the forefront to ensure that the lived-realities of these women are acknowledged at all stages of program development and delivery.</p>
<p>Housing for Women-Led Families</p>	<p>As Ottawa moves forward with its 10-year plan to end homelessness through a Housing First approach, we recommend the development of programs that prioritize housing for women-led families and acknowledge the reality of women’s lives as mothers, drug users, and/or sex workers.</p> <p>Housing providers can look to models like the YWCA’s Crabtree Corner³ and RainCity Housing’s Budzey Building⁴ in Vancouver, BC. These housing models are rooted in harm-reduction.</p>

² At the time of data collection, Purple Bridges was successfully running as a volunteer initiative in Vanier. As of April 2018, Purple Bridges is not operating but there is a possibility that the program could resurface.

³ YWCA’s Crabtree Corner: <https://ywcavan.org/programs/crabtree-corner>

⁴ RainCity Housing’s Budzey Building: <http://www.raincityhousing.org/what-we-do/the-budzey-for-women-and-women-led-families/>

<p>Knowledge Hub / Best Practices Network</p>	<p>Many organizations across Ottawa provide services to street-level/survival sex workers, but such programs and supports are often unknown by frontline workers/managers in different areas of the city.</p> <p>We suggest the development of a knowledge hub / best practices network to increase discussion and collaboration amongst service providers working with street-level sex workers in Ottawa.</p>
<p>Police Liaison Officers</p>	<p>We recommend that the Ottawa Police Service connect with street-level/survival sex workers and service providers to assess the need for liaison officers in the community that are sensitive to the lived-realities of women and sex workers experiencing homelessness / housing instability.</p>
<p>Evaluate Use of Criminal Record Checks</p>	<p>Ottawa should critically assess the impact of having a criminal record on the ability to find and maintain safe and affordable housing. Many street-level/survival sex workers have criminal/police records that prevent them from accessing housing due to an increase in landlords and property managers across the city that request background checks. These discriminatory policies limit housing options for women who are trying to find a safe place to live.</p>
<p>Public Education and Anti-Stigma Initiatives</p>	<p>To end harm and discrimination against street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa, we recommend collaboration on public education and anti-stigma initiatives led by sex workers in partnership with service providers and allies in the community.</p>
<p>Future Research</p>	<p>Future research should consider the experiences of homelessness and housing instability of men, youth, LGBTQ2S+ communities, and Indigenous women involved in street-level/survival sex work.</p>
<p>Development of a Community Plan</p>	<p>Ottawa should consider the development of a comprehensive community plan to address the housing and safety needs of street-level/survival sex workers. This would be a collaborative process between all interested stakeholders in the community, but the plan would pay specific attention to the needs, concerns, and lived-experiences of sex workers experiencing homelessness/housing instability.</p>

Introduction

In June 2014, Crime Prevention Ottawa [CPO] organized a conference to bring together “individuals, groups and organizations interested in promoting safety in the sex trade” (Kwan 2014a: 2). Representatives from organizations such as the Youth Services Bureau, the Shepherds of Good Hope, Ottawa Community Housing, and the Ottawa Police Services collaborated with residents and sex workers to discuss the immediate concerns amongst street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa. The top priority identified in the [Conference Report: Safety and the Sex Trade](#) was “**safe, affordable housing and safe houses for sex workers**” (ibid: 9). Other priorities highlighted at the conference included: the development of specialized police units, of anti-stigma awareness campaigns, and of prevention and public education initiatives. After the conference, CPO funded a Steering Committee to facilitate a research project on housing, safety, and sex work – the process and findings of this research project (including recommendations) are presented in this final report. The mandate of the study was to research and document the housing-related safety needs of sex workers in Ottawa and to make recommendations for action

Despite the frontline and housing services available in Ottawa, isolation, discrimination, and stigmatization of sex workers prevents many from knowing about and/or accessing these supports. To remedy this the community must collaborate, and “in order to be effective in any future actions by community partners, the approach has to engage and be inclusive of sex workers” (ibid: 9).

As part of the **hidden homeless**, street-level/survival sex workers are an extremely vulnerable, marginalized, and underserved population. Many are living in unsafe situations (in stairwells of buildings, camping in the forest, living with drug dealers, etc.) and do not often access traditional shelter or housing services in the city. While there are no official data on the exact number of street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa in this report, what we know from service providers and peers is enough to warrant attention to this group of women. For example, Daisy’s Drop-In alone – a service in the Carlington area – has connected with 54 street-level/survival sex workers over the past two years.

To provide some context for the issue of housing, safety, and sex work, Part I of this report presents literature on homelessness in Canada with a specific focus on women who are involved in street-level/survival sex work. This section also contains an overview of programs across Canada that provide supports and services to women experiencing homelessness/housing instability, and tells us more about what is known and what is not known about the needs of street-level/survival sex workers. Part II of the report continues this conversation on housing, safety, and sex work, but speaks specifically to the Ottawa area and outlines the gaps in service provision in the city.

In Part III, we detail the methods used to gather data for this report which were developed based on existing literature/reports and in consultation with peers and service providers. Working with peer researchers and engaging in constant collaboration and consultation with service providers

was key to the success of this research project. These relationships will be highlighted in this report's section on methodology. Major findings from all three phases of the research project point to the intersecting barriers to housing that converge for street-level/survival sex workers; the success of low-barrier, person-centred approaches that work to meet survival sex workers "where they are at"; and the need to prioritize and coordinate greater access to service models of this kind.

Part IV of the report outlines the key findings of this research project and documents the housing-related safety needs of street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa. Major findings of this research project indicate a need for more affordable and well-maintained housing, more supportive/transitional housing programs, better protections from housing takeovers, and more peer-led outreach and drop-in initiatives across the city. All in all, these findings help identify the gaps in services and supports for women street-level/survival sex workers experiencing homelessness/housing instability and contribute to the conclusions and recommendations that we present in Parts V and VI of the report.

Part I: Literature Review and Scan of Best Practices

Homelessness in Canada

Results from a survey conducted by The Salvation Army in 2011 show that almost “100% of Canadians believe that homeless people deserve a sense of dignity” (10) and 86% agree that “housing is a fundamental right” for everyone living in Canada (ibid). While such statements demonstrate the compassion and hospitality that is typically associated with Canada and Canadians, other research gives us a reality check on the state of homelessness in our country. Over the course of a year, more than 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness with more than 35,000 individuals sleeping on the streets or in shelters every night (Gaetz et al. 2014: 5). The lack of affordable housing in Canada combined with insufficient social assistance (Scott 2007) has created a housing crisis across the country, and several municipalities – including Ottawa – are mobilizing to end this crisis.

There are many reasons why individuals experience chronic homelessness, including: poverty, a lack of employment opportunities, low educational achievement, struggles with mental health and/or addiction, poor physical health (Alliance to End Homelessness 2014: 4), and experiences with victimization (Roebuck 2008; Scott 2007). Youth often enter homelessness due to a negative family life and a neglectful home environment, an inadequate child welfare system, and experiences with trauma and abuse (Karabanow et al. 2010). If we understand that “most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, stressful and distressing” (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness 2012: 1) then we can move forward with a strategic and compassionate approach to address this multi-faceted issue.

Needs of Homeless Women in Canada & Barriers to Shelter and Safety

Women and girls are often left out of considerations of homelessness, and yet a recent estimate of 30% of the 15, 000 - 30, 000 Canadians experiencing homelessness are female.

(Van Berkum & Oudshoorn 2015: 5)

A 2009 report on women’s safety by the YWCA Canada indicates that “the shortage of housing options available to women escaping violence in their homes has reached crisis proportions” (21). As we continue to use emergency shelters as permanent solutions, the needs of women in our communities go unmet⁵ and the risk of experiencing further violence, trauma, social isolation, and personal health issues increases (Novac et al. 2004). “Traditionally, homelessness has been constructed and viewed as a male experience” (Lenon 2000: 123) but new housing initiatives must acknowledge the specific nature of women’s homelessness – which is often characterized as *hidden* and *episodic* (Mosher 2013).

⁵ According to the most recent update on Ottawa’s 10-year plan to end homelessness, the number of chronically homeless women rose 6.6% from 2016 to 2017 (Willing 2018).

“Common indicators leading to homelessness for women include: fleeing abusive situations, addictions, leaving prison, widowhood, mental health issues, pregnancy, and past traumatic experiences” (Walsh et al. 2010: 36). Many of these indicators – especially mental health and addiction issues – also serve as barriers to accessing more traditional shelter services, thus leaving women at greater risk for long-term homelessness (Bopp 2014). While the Housing First⁶ model is a good start to addressing some of these service gaps and barriers, there is an ongoing need for supportive and transitional housing models for women that have multiple and varied needs. For example, Janet Mosher from the *Homes for Women*⁷ campaign (2013) states that “[v]iolence survivors may need security measures for protection” and that women and girls need a safe space where they are supported by peers and staff to “recreate community” (2).

To adequately address the needs of women experiencing homelessness, we first need to know more about them. Unfortunately, women’s homelessness is often described as *hidden* (Callaghan et al. 2002; Miller & Du Mont 2000; Van Berkum & Oudshoorn 2015; Whitzman 2006), making it hard to develop a complete understanding of their experiences, needs, barriers, and concerns. Instead of staying in shelters, women often couch surf, stay with family members, live outdoors, engage in survival sex for a place to stay, or remain living with their abusers (Duff et al. 2011; Miller & Du Mont 2000). Given that the number of homeless women “has been estimated at three and a half times the number of those counted in current shelter-focused surveys” (Van Berkum & Oudshoorn 2015: 5), communities need to improve efforts at reaching out to marginalized and vulnerable women.

It is important to recognize the heterogeneity of homeless women because it necessitates a diversity of services that does not yet exist in many communities. Whether Indigenous, young, elderly, immigrant, rural, trans, differently abled, or racialized, “[a]ll of these groups of women share common characteristics of marginalization from policy making and from political power” (Callaghan et al. 2002). Apart from these demographic differences there is also a diversity of experiences that must be addressed by housing-related services, including violence/trauma (Anderson & Rayens 2004), mental health and addictions (Whitzman 2006), criminalization, and poverty (Van Berkum & Oudshoorn 2015).

A general lack of housing options for all women is a common theme throughout this report, but there are structural, socio-political and personal barriers to exiting homelessness for street-level/survival sex workers that have been identified in a recent literature review and should be of concern to service providers who work specifically with this population (see Table 1).

⁶ “Housing First is a recovery-oriented approach to homelessness that involves moving people who experience homelessness into independent and permanent housing as quickly as possible, with no preconditions, and then providing them with additional services and supports as needed” (Gaetz 2013: 8).

⁷ “*Homes for Women* is a campaign to prevent, reduce, and ultimately end the homelessness of women and girls in Canada.” More information available at: <http://www.homesforwomen.ca/>

Table 1: Barriers to Exiting Homelessness for Sex Workers

Structural

- Lack of harm reduction services available.
- Lack of flexibility in service appointments.
- Exclusion from services due to nocturnal lifestyle.
- Preferences by women to not access services that do not permit drug or alcohol use as sobriety can trigger poor mental health.

Socio-political

- Heightened emphasis on prostitution laws and police discrimination (i.e. fear of law enforcement) as barriers to service and housing access.
- Stigmatization of engaging in survival sex.

Personal/Psychological

- Fear, shame, and guilt.
- Feel at fault for one's situation.
- Disempowered and worthless (feel their needs are inconsiderable).
- Learn to normalize their conditions.
- Do not have life skills and resources to effect change.
- Feel too overwhelmed to access services after periods of crisis.
- Leaving behind a network of familiarity – women and girls leave behind relationships, routines and status that helped them feel connected to their social and spatial environment.

(Adapted from Van Berkum & Oudshoorn 2015: 85-86)

To address these barriers, some needs and preferences (see Table 2) have been identified in the literature which serve as guidelines to those looking to develop housing-related supports for street-level/survival sex workers.

Table 2: Housing Needs / Preferences for Sex Workers

- Youth and gender specific supportive housing models.
- Do not want to live by oneself until they consider themselves stable.
- Transitional housing to help establish trust.
- Women-only single room occupancies (independence with support networks).
- Revise curfews and guest policies.
- Adequate and secure foundation before one can address interrelated issues (e.g. mental illness or substance use).
- Housing support workers.
- Harm reduction in housing programs (e.g. Housing First).
- Variable housing options: ranging from low threshold transitional shelters to supportive housing models.

(Adapted from Van Berkum & Oudshoorn 2015: 86)

Several of these needs and barriers will be addressed in subsequent sections of this report, along with others that are specific to street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa.

Housing First and the Plan to End Homelessness in Ottawa

To tackle homelessness locally, the City of Ottawa has developed a ten-year plan⁸ to meet the needs of all homeless individuals (and persons who are at risk of becoming homeless) and reduce the city's reliance on emergency shelters – a resource that is currently overused and overburdened in Canada (ATEH 2014; Gaetz et al. 2014; Karabanow 2004). A ten-year plan to end homelessness involves a lot of research, communication, collaboration, and resources. The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness [CAEH] provides guidance for implementing such a plan⁹ by focusing on a Housing First approach. Ottawa has embraced the Housing First model and is now seeking to improve collaboration amongst all community members, organizations, and stakeholders to provide housing, stability and support to all people experiencing homelessness/housing instability.

Beyond providing people with a safe space to live, a plan to end homelessness must also develop programs and supports that are tailored to the various groups that comprise a community (Gaetz et al. 2014). For example, there will be specific housing programs developed for youth, Indigenous persons, women survivors of violence, newcomers and their families, and so on. The group that is the focus of this project is women-identified street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa who experience homelessness/housing insecurity and personal safety concerns because of social, economic, and legal issues.

Sex Work & Stigma

Common stereotypes include the assumption that sex workers are immoral, promiscuous, addicted to drugs, responsible for the transmission of STIs, dishonest and disreputable, and/or trapped in the industry, and that they are victims operating without a choice.

(Bruckert & Parent 2013: 70)

Despite the understanding that “sex work offers workers the opportunity to make an income that will meet their needs as well as afford them the independence, status, and sense of self-worth associated with financial security” (Bruckert & Parent 2013: 62-63), the ongoing victimization and criminalization of sex workers and their clients in our communities¹⁰ makes this work dangerous and feeds into misleading stereotypes (Jeffrey & Sullivan 2009; Lewis et al. 2013; Lowman 2000). In Canada, the legal context surrounding sex work contributes to the isolation of workers as they feel it necessary to “hide their profession from friends, family and their home community” (Lazarus et al. 2012: 145). Although there are organizations across the country that work to help sex workers leave the trade, not all sex workers are looking to exit the trade. Rather, some are

⁸ City of Ottawa: Our ten-year plan. Available at: <http://ottawa.ca/en/residents/social-services/housing/our-ten-year-plan>

⁹ CAEH: A Plan, Not a Dream. Available at: <http://www.caeh.ca/a-plan-not-a-dream/>

¹⁰ While many police departments across Canada (including Ottawa) have started targeting clients in lieu of sex workers, recent evidence demonstrates “that criminalizing the purchase of sexual services does not protect the health and safety of sex workers” (Landsberg et al 2017: 563).

looking for a safer way to continue doing their work as they try to find safe housing and access other supports in their communities.

While stigma, and structural stigma¹¹, impacts many individual sex workers, street level/survival sex workers experience the most damaging and dangerous effects. Research conducted by Canadian criminologists Christine Bruckert and Collette Parent (2013), indicates that “street-based sex workers are the most vulnerable...to violence from diverse sources, including the police, community members, customers, and aggressors” (65). There is a long history in Canada of community residents and groups working together to drive prostitution out of their neighbourhoods (Lowman, 2000), but sex workers and their allies are now working together to reduce discrimination and stigma (Lewis et al. 2013) in order to create a safe space for all workers – and especially for youth and LGBTQ2S+ communities.

LGBTQ2S+ Experiences of Sex Work & Homelessness

People of all genders and sexual orientations experience homelessness and/or are involved in street-level/survival sex work, though LGBTQ2S+ people are overrepresented among both groups (Abramovich 2015; Fitzgerald et al. 2015).¹² Due to homophobic and transphobic discrimination and violence, LGBTQ2S+ people who are homeless and/or involved in street-level/survival sex work encounter compounded stigma and risk—both on the streets and in support services—compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers.¹³ The experiences of harassment, institutional discrimination, and violence are particularly pronounced for sex workers facing other intersecting barriers to inclusion due to race, gender identity, migration status, working conditions, and so forth (Fitzgerald et al. 2015).

Due to stigma and discrimination, much remains unknown about the experiences of LGBTQ2S+ people who are homeless and/or involved in street-level/survival sex work. For starters, the shelter system does not gather consistent (if any) data based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Where data collection mechanisms are in place, assumptions are often made about individual service users and their sexual orientation or gender identity that are incongruent with peoples’ own identities. More importantly, homophobia and transphobia prevent many LGBTQ2S+ people from accessing the shelter system in the first place and so these people are not captured in traditional service counts.

Further, non-aggregated research on LGBTQ2S+ people in general, often lumps together very disparate identities/communities. This means that identity-specific experiences are erased, such as those of trans and gender diverse people (hereafter trans people), especially trans women of colour, who experience extraordinarily high rates of violence (Fitzgerald et al. 2015). Even in death, trans experience is frequently erased, as often occurs for trans women who die by murder

¹¹ “Structural stigma...is the result of a carefully calculated decision at an institutional or bureaucratic level to manage the risk that a particular population is perceived to present, either to themselves, to the institution, or to society” (Hannem 2012: 24-25).

¹² The most reliable and frequently cited statistic suggests 25-40% of homeless youth are LGBTQ2S+. However, this data is by now quite outdated, signaling a great need for updated/increased research into LGBTQ2S+ homelessness and/or survival sex work.

¹³ Cisgender, often abbreviated to cis, refers to a person whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth.

or suicide but are publicly mis-gendered in the media or in official reports of their death (Quinlan 2017). In this way, the experience of violent discrimination and transphobia is made invisible.

Often contending with systemic transphobia, homophobia, and racism simultaneously, many LGBTQ2S+ street-level/survival sex workers choose not to access traditional supports. This absence compounds the large gap in understanding on the part of service providers who are unsure of how to best meet LGBTQ2S+ needs. Yet there are LGBTQ2S+ specific programs in Canada that are working hard to be responsive. In 2015, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary introduced Canada's first LGBTQ2S+ host homes program¹⁴; the YMCA's Sprott House in Toronto opened the city's first LGBTQ2S+ transitional housing program in 2016¹⁵; and Vancouver's RainCity Housing recently introduced a Housing First program for chronically and episodically homeless LGBTQ2S+ youth.¹⁶ These new programs provide exciting opportunities for data collection and evaluation specific to the housing needs of LGBTQ2S+ people in Canada.

Youth Experiences of Sex Work & Homelessness

[Self-determination] means having a voice in the decision-making processes...it's about having safe spaces for us to disclose what we're doing without fear of prosecution, or fear of being 'saved'. It's about healthy dialogues that are productive and supportive. We need spaces to talk honestly about the sex trade and what that means for people under eighteen, for example, without fear of having someone call the cops.

(JJ 2013: 76)

To 'save' youth from sexual exploitation, protection often comes in the form of punishment, such as strict rules (Bittle 2013), and young people tend to avoid accessing social services due to the requirements demanded by existing program structures (Busby 2003; Karabanow et al. 2010). As JJ (2013) notes, "young people involved in the sex trade...are rarely seen as possessing any form of agency and are often excluded from a rights-based approach that meets them where they are at" (74).

A qualitative study (Karabanow et al. 2010) that involved interviews with street youth in six major Canadian cities, including Ottawa, demonstrates the importance of providing supports in the community that meet the needs of young people. While traumatic experiences of homelessness often lead youth to look for a way out, "exiting street life is a challenging and non-linear process" (32), therefore services must be flexible and diverse. The study found that "low self-esteem and low self-confidence are significant barriers to the exiting process" (44), meaning that programs must encourage the building of social capital and foster the development of "trust, reciprocity,

¹⁴ For more information on the Boys and Girls Club Aura Host Homes program for LGBTQ2S+ youth, see <http://lgbtq2stoolkit.learningcommunity.ca/aura-host-homes/>

¹⁵ For more information on the YMCA's Sprott House program for LGBTQ2S+ youth, see <https://ymcagta.org/news/ymca-sprott-house-announces-lgbtq2sa-youth-housing-services>

¹⁶ For more information on RainCity Housing's LGBTQ2S+ youth housing program, see <http://www.raincityhousing.org/what-we-do/lgbtq2s-youth-housing/>

social support and social ties” (15). Along with providing appropriate emotional support, youth also disclosed that they would like to receive help with finding housing, completing their education, and preparing for employment (53).

In terms of housing supports, the youth involved in the study indicated that they preferred transitional housing models. The emergency shelter system does not prepare youth for independent living, and the strict rules that are typically associated with shelters – such as curfews and guest policies – keep youth away from these services (Karabanow et al. 2010). The time limit imposed by the shelter system – which is often between 30 and 60 days – is also problematic as “locating supportive or affordable housing often takes much longer” (71).

In summary, the research on homeless youth and young people involved in sex work demonstrates the need for community services that recognize the diversity and complexity of this population. The following section on housing supports for adult sex workers will echo some of these findings, emphasizing the need for new approaches to address the housing, shelter, and safety needs for everyone involved in the sex work.

Housing for Sex Workers: Problems with Current Approaches

As communities across Canada work to improve access to safe and affordable housing, street-level/survival sex workers – and specifically women sex workers – struggle to navigate a shelter system that is restrictive, dangerous, and very oriented to the needs of men. High rates of violence experienced by sex workers within the shelters and exposure to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections are just a couple of the risks identified in research studies (Duff et al. 2011; Shannon et al. 2008; 2009). A 2011 study that examined the experiences of women sex workers living in the shelter system in Vancouver, highlights several problems that need to be addressed as new strategies emerge under the Housing First model.

- **Curfew policies:**
 - “In residences with strict curfews, women felt that their safety was placed at risk and the policies directly limited their ability to decide when and where to work, causing them to make decisions that negatively impacted upon their safety” (Lazarus et al. 2011: 1603).
- **Guest policies:**
 - “[R]estrictive guest policies alienated women from their support networks, including friends, family and partners, as well as impacted their work with clients, forcing all of their social interactions onto the street” (ibid).

- **Co-ed residences:**

- “Many of the shelters...were co-ed residences, also housing men. Even when men slept on different floors of the buildings, interactions between residents were common. Women sometimes relied on emergency shelters to escape from unhealthy relationships and felt vulnerable to falling back into these same patterns of abuse and exploitation when staying in co-ed buildings” (1604).

Policy changes in these areas along with better access to health care (Lazarus et al. 2012) and more reliance on “peer-led outreach strategies” (Duff et al. 2011: 6) are the building blocks for more successful sex-worker specific housing frameworks that aim to be more comprehensive and adaptable.

Housing for Women Sex Workers: Some Successful Models and Strategies

Anti-oppressive service organizations recognize that there are political, economic and social forces influencing the individual’s relationship with street life. It does not involve ‘blaming the individual’ but links structural forces to the individuals’ situation.

(Karabanow et al. 2010: 120)

To align policy with current research, some supportive housing programs across Canada have started to work under an anti-oppressive¹⁷ philosophy. In practice, these changes would include a more flexible curfew model that gives women “increased agency in deciding when to work and which dates to accept” (Lazarus et al. 2011: 1603). Less restrictive guest policies would also allow “women to bring dates home, [improve] women’s abilities to reduce sexual risks... [and increase the] women’s sense of safety in the event of a ‘bad date’” (ibid). Finally, increasing the availability of women-only houses encourages the development of peer-support networks that also act “as informal safety strategies” (1604).

Other research has suggested that due to the displacement and isolation that is characteristic of street-level/survival sex workers, there is a need to increase the use of peer-led outreach. “Outreach as a safer environment intervention strategy has been shown to be an effective strategy to prevent HIV...as well as an essential link between marginalized populations and health services” (Deering et al. 2011: 46).

Another qualitative research study based out of Vancouver outlines the ‘Unsanctioned Safer Sex Work Environment Model’¹⁸ (Krüsi et al. 2012). Housing programs that adopt this model “offer a minimal-barrier, high-tolerance environment and follow a women-centred empowerment and harm reduction/health promotion philosophy” (1155). The policies and practices incorporate

¹⁷ “Anti-oppressive organizations foster an individual’s strengths and acknowledge the significance of one’s personal experiences” (Karabanow 2004: 81).

¹⁸ The study by Krüsi et al. (2012) looked at two supportive housing programs in British Columbia that have adopted the unsanctioned safer sex work environment model in order to increase the health and safety of sex workers.

what has already been discussed in this section (flexible curfew and guest policies, women-only buildings, and informal peer-supports), and include more formal security features such as camera surveillance, and “access to health, prevention, and harm reduction resources” (ibid). The staff who work in these housing environments are attentive and supportive of the residents, providing what Karabanow et al. (2010) would call a “continuum of care... aimed at fulfilling [the women’s] basic needs and continues with access to services, or a combination of services that are geared to further meeting a wider variety of individual needs” (118).

Anti-oppressive service organizations and unsanctioned safer sex work environments allow for the active participation of women sex workers in a safe space, and such philosophies and frameworks are a common element throughout most of the programs and services presented in the following section.

Housing and Community Services for Sex Workers: Best Practices

As mentioned previously, there are several established housing and frontline services across Canada that meet the needs of street-level/survival sex workers. These services fall into four categories: drop-in centres, outreach supports, transitional/supportive housing units, and public education/advocacy groups – with some organizations providing a combination of the four.

Drop-in centres, such as Kindred House¹⁹ in Edmonton and WISH²⁰ in Vancouver, serve to provide women with basic personal and safety needs. For example, the staff at these centres offer street-level/survival sex workers a place to shower, do laundry, pick up harm-reduction supplies, and eat a healthy meal. The cornerstone of these centres is the judgment-free environment within which women can enter and access the appropriate care and support that they need in the moment. Some drop-in centres, like Shift²¹ in Calgary, even offer counselling services, employment and training supports, and facilitate referrals to mental health and addiction treatment programs.

In terms of outreach, organizations like the PEERS²² Victoria Resource Society and Stepping Stone²³ in Halifax spend a lot of time out in the community connecting to women who might not otherwise access the supports and services available to them. Rather than requiring women to attend the drop-in centres, staff on the outreach teams deliver supplies (food, water, clothing, harm-reduction kits, etc.) directly to the women on the streets where they are living and working. STAND – an outreach program for youth that works out of the Yonge Street Mission²⁴ in downtown Toronto – also provides “on-the-spot support in areas such as housing, detox referrals, and crisis intervention” (Saldanha & Parenteau 2013: 1276). Outreach teams are key in

¹⁹ More information about Kindred House available at: <http://www.bmhc.net/services/kindred.html>

²⁰ More information about WISH available at: <http://wish-vancouver.net/>

²¹ More information about Shift available at: <http://www.shiftcalgary.org/>

²² More information about PEERS available at: <http://www.safersexwork.ca/>

²³ More information about Stepping Stone available at: <http://steppingstonens.ca/>

²⁴ More information about Yonge Street Mission available at: <https://www.ysm.ca/>

providing services to street-level/survival sex workers, as they help foster trust and engagement with women and youth who are otherwise hesitant to seek help within their communities.

The Vivian²⁵, located in Vancouver's downtown eastside, is an often-cited housing model for street-level/survival sex workers. It is a women-only Housing First program that provides flexible supports "to women who have experienced multiple barriers" to housing (Scott 2013: 61). The building is staffed 24/7, and to ensure that the needs and concerns of the residents are being met The Vivian has developed partnerships with many services in the area including: mental health services, local nurses and doctors, social workers, probation/parole officers, emergency shelters, sex worker support groups, and supports for individuals living with HIV/AIDS. The housing services provided at The Vivian were the inspiration for Brigid's Place here in Ottawa (more details on this later in the report).

Recognizing that family and community connectedness helps women to thrive is an important insight, and it is one at the heart of women-centred health and housing programs like the YWCA's Crabtree Corner²⁶ and RainCity Housing's Budzey Building,²⁷ both in Vancouver; as well as the HER²⁸ program in Edmonton. These service models are rooted in harm-reduction and acknowledge the reality of women's lives. Programs are supported by on-site staff that assist women to create and maintain thriving environments for themselves and their families. Both Crabtree Corner and the HER program are specifically for pregnant and parenting women with substance use issues (including women trying to regain custody of their children). The Budzey is for women and women-led families (i.e.: partners can also live with them in the building, though women remain the lease-holders). While not explicitly for women sex workers, many women accessing services are of course street-level/survival sex workers as these programs offer non-judgmental, low-barrier support for street involved women.

Other housing programs across Canada provide services and supports to women who are looking to exit sex work and/or seek protection from violence and sexual exploitation. For example, Dignity House²⁹ in Winnipeg and Deborah's Gate³⁰ in Lower Mainland of British Columbia both provide safe and secure housing environments as well as offer counseling, legal, social services and life-skills programs to help women with their various needs and concerns.

²⁵ More information about The Vivian available at: <http://www.raincityhousing.org/what-we-do/womens-housing/>

²⁶ More information about Crabtree Corner available at: <https://ywcavan.org/programs/crabtree-corner>

²⁷ More information about the Budzey available at: <http://www.raincityhousing.org/what-we-do/the-budzey-for-women-and-women-led-families/>

²⁸ More information about HER available at: <https://fasdprevention.wordpress.com/2015/08/01/h-e-r-pregnancy-program-in-edmonton-alberta/>

²⁹ More information about Dignity House available at: <http://www.dignityhouse.ca/>

³⁰ More information about Deborah's Gate available at: <http://www.deborahsgate.ca/>

Advocacy groups play a huge role in ensuring the safety of street-level/survival sex workers in our communities. Successful advocacy groups work hard to include the voices and experiences of sex workers in their activities and fully recognize “sex workers as legitimate sources of knowledge about their work” (Love et al. 2013: 1). There is a lot of important public education being done by and for sex workers in a variety of grassroots and advocacy organizations across Canada, including Big Susie’s³¹ in Hamilton, Chez Stella³² in Montreal, the PACE³³ (Providing Alternatives, Counselling & Education) Society in Vancouver, and POWER³⁴ (Prostitutes of Ottawa/Gatineau Work, Educate and Resist) here in Ottawa. These organizations engage in a variety of activities, including:

- collaborate with local universities to conduct mixed-methods research projects that provide a detailed overview of the lived experiences, needs, and concerns of sex workers;
- facilitate programs that promote the dignity and empowerment of sex workers;
- network with community members, organizations, and local stakeholders;
- promote public education initiatives that work to reduce stigma and discrimination;
- include and prioritize the voices and lived-realities of sex workers;
- endorse an agenda that promotes the safety of all persons involved in sex work – with a specific focus on decriminalization; and
- offer support services (drop-in and outreach) for sex workers in the community.

Peer Support

Many people working to end homelessness and the discrimination of specific groups – such as sex workers – promote a grassroots approach to program development, which involves “collaboration between public health professionals, policy makers and urban planners in developing long-term, non-exploitative housing options for impoverished women” (Lazarus et al. 2011: 1606). An example of this bottom-up approach can already be found in Ottawa among people who use drugs and their allies in the community. The PROUD³⁵ cohort study was “grounded in a community-based participatory research framework”³⁶ and relied on “peers’ expertise stemming from their lived experience with drug use” (Lazarus et al. 2014: 1). The PROUD study demonstrates the value of incorporating people with lived-experience in research projects and the positive outcomes that appear in the community when populations that are traditionally isolated and ignored are empowered.

³¹ More information about Big Susie’s available at: <http://www.bigsusies.com/>

³² More information about Chez Stella available at: <http://chezstella.org/>

³³ For more information on the PACE Society available at: <http://www.pace-society.org/services/support-services/>

³⁴ More information about POWER available at: <http://www.powerottawa.ca>

³⁵ More information about PROUD available at: <http://theproudproject.com/>

³⁶ “Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an approach that prioritizes community inclusion throughout the research process, with community members bringing their knowledge and lived experience to the research with the goal of combining education and action to achieve social change that would benefit the community” (Lazarus et al. 2014: 2).

Summary of Literature and Best Practices

While each of the organizations presented in this section provide a different combination of services to street-level/survival sex workers and women experiencing homelessness/housing instability, there are very clear common elements that appear in the successful programs:

- Provision of a combination of drop-in and outreach services.
- Operation under a harm reduction model and adopting a rights-based approach.
- Connection with a wide variety of community services to ensure a continuum of care.
- Development of programs that empower women, help them build trust, relationships, and self-esteem, and acknowledge their agency and independence.
- Inclusion of a public education component to reduce stigma and discrimination, and improve relationships between sex workers and the larger community.
- Development of women-only housing models.
- Friendly and well-trained staff that support residents/clients in a safe space and judgement-free environment.
- Inclusion of sex workers in all aspects of program development and delivery.

This literature review and scan of best practices presents a lot of information to be considered as the city of Ottawa works to improve the housing, safety, and shelter needs of street-level/survival sex workers. Moving forward under a Housing First model, those working in program development and delivery need to consider the specific and unique needs of sex workers – both those who are looking to exit the trade and those who wish to continue working in it. New services are needed for both youth and adults and, while there are excellent programs offered across Canada that serve as great models and guidelines, research conducted with and for sex workers in Ottawa helps to narrow down the specific needs of this community.

Part II: Local Scan – Ottawa

Part I of this report clarifies the models and strategies being implemented across Canada to support the housing and safety needs of street-level/survival sex workers, but it is also important to understand the specific needs, concerns, and history of the Ottawa area to develop and implement appropriate recommendations. Discussion during a second meeting of the project's Steering Committee in June 2015 led to two recommendations:

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1. *To review existing literature for information / knowledge of what women need to access safety and shelter.*
 2. *To develop Ottawa's historical context by engaging in interviews with local service providers, to support the collection and review of documents and stories / experiences related to the emergence of today's Ottawa service landscape.*
-

A variety of resources were accessed and analyzed in response to these recommendations. Academic literature helped to form a general understanding of women's homelessness, while documents such as minutes from local community meetings contributed to knowledge of Ottawa's historical response to women and street-level/survival sex workers who experience homelessness/housing instability.

Apart from the document/literature review, six interviews were conducted with various key informants³⁷ in the Ottawa area (these individuals were identified by the project's Steering Committee as good sources of local and historical information). These informal interviews took place between September 1, 2015 and September 10, 2015 and each lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. The questions asked in the interviews were meant to garner general information about the service landscape in Ottawa and helped develop a better understanding about needs, barriers, neighbourhood dynamics, and program development and delivery.

Responding to the Needs of Street-Level/Survival Sex Workers in Ottawa

Street-based sex workers peacefully co-existed with working class inhabitants of the Byward Market area for over 150 years. Tension emerged in the early 1980s when, in a process of urban renewal, upwardly-mobile citizens began purchasing property in this centrally-located area. These new residents brought with them cultural, political and economic capital that allowed them to redefine the neighbourhood.

(Bruckert & Chabot 2010: 11)

³⁷ The six key informants selected for this phase of the project included program managers and executive directors of various organizations in the city that provide direct services to street-level/survival sex workers, as well as advocates and academics who have a good grasp on the history of service provision and experiences of sex workers in Ottawa.

Since the 1980's sex workers in Ottawa have been in a constant state of displacement, first from the Lowertown area, then from Hintonburg, and more recently Vanier where gentrification is affecting life in the community. As communities change there are concerns about neighbourhood safety that must be addressed, and street-level/survival sex workers often become the subject of such concerns. While there are certainly efforts to provide supports to sex workers and other vulnerable/marginalized persons in Ottawa, these groups are mostly defined as being *outside* of the community – thus increasing the risks that neighbourhoods are trying to eliminate.

Apart from displacement, police sweeps have also been used to control the 'problem of prostitution' in Ottawa. This response has led to tenuous relationships between sex workers and the Ottawa Police Service, and has contributed to the issue of overcrowding at the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre. The safety of street-level/survival sex workers is also diminished as the "sweeps push women to work on the periphery...working in areas that have greater safety risks" (Interview #1). Advocacy work by the Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa, POWER, and the Sexual Assault Support Centre has brought some change to this strategy, but even "targeting the Johns still drives the women out" (ibid).

Many people acknowledge the negative impacts of these responses, and various reports have recorded the violence and safety concerns that sex workers in Ottawa experience because of ongoing stigma and discrimination in the community:

Ottawa-area sex workers sometimes experience situational and predatory violence on the job at the hands of community members, clients, and aggressors preying on sex workers' because they are vulnerable to stigma and the law.

(Bruckert & Chabot 2010: 44)

When asked what the most dangerous or concerning part of their work was, primary concerns included condom use and sexually transmitted infections, and being assaulted or attacked. Secondary concerns included getting arrested, working alone, working in isolated locations, and substance abuse issues.

(Biancardi et al. n.d: 11)

Although there is a lot of expressed concern about the presence and visibility of sex-trade workers in neighbourhoods across Ottawa, a research project by Kristina Rohde (2010) demonstrates a lack of consensus within communities about which approach to take with this issue. As she observed the discussions and activities of *Together for Vanier* – a local neighbourhood association – Rohde noticed a lot of contradictions between the needs and concerns of the community (in relation to community safety) and the strategies used to address them. She also noted that "the community is not as unified as it might appear to be concerning street sex work" (97) and that often there is a desire to increase the services "needed to deal with the underlying issue of street sex workers, but most of the time these are unavailable" (85). Others have pointed to a "lack of public will" (Interview #1) to effectively mobilize around the needs of sex workers and an overall lack of funding and resources available in the city of Ottawa for housing-related services.

Several organizations participate in outreach activities to better serve street-level/survival sex workers, but it is difficult to provide a continuum-of-care under these conditions. There are also efforts at public education to reduce NIMBY attitudes and foster better relationships between sex workers and other members of the community, but the reaction of neighbours to sex workers in their communities remains a hurdle in Ottawa.

Tried to do public education in Vanier, but the result was still pushing people to the peripheral.

(Interview #1)

There seems to be a lot of stigma which leads to not wanting to accommodate sex workers or human trafficking victims – due to lack of education on the issues...I think part of the solution is really educating the general public on who these people are and they don't have to be a threat or a nuisance to the community.

(Interview #3)

You are going to get NIMBY no matter what – you just have to build it into your plan... Trying to reconcile what you are trying to do with the neighbourhood reaction is difficult – there are going to be people that are unhappy no matter what you try to do.

(Interview #2)

Another issue in Ottawa is the conflation of sex work with human trafficking that often distracts from the primary goal of developing services and providing supports to women. This is “a really polarizing issue” (Interview #3).

There is a huge fight going on right now in Canada and all over the world about whether the sex trade is a work choice or a form of violence against women. That's a big unresolved question [and] the lens you bring to that question shapes what you think the best responses are. There are different schools of thought – legitimate on both sides – but it impacts on how you react to this and what you do about it, what you see as the options.

(Interview #2)

Where there seems to be some consensus on this issue is when we speak about youth and the need for services that help young people who are being coerced and exploited in our community. A 2014 report by Persons Against the Crime of Trafficking in Humans (PACT-Ottawa) highlights that many victims of human trafficking in Ottawa are between the ages of 12 – 25 “with 16 year olds being most vulnerable to recruitment tactics” (2). Histories of trauma and placement in group homes are identified as risk factors for youth, therefore efforts must be made to increase the personal safety, psychological care, and other support services for vulnerable youth in Ottawa.

The primary issue in Ottawa remains a general lack of housing – both for street-level/survival sex workers and for all others who experience homelessness.

It is difficult to get new housing in Ottawa, period. It's especially difficult if you are talking about situations when people are going to be doing things that neighbourhoods frown on.

(Interview #1)

It comes out of a shortage of resources. There is a motivation to just get everyone out the door as fast as possible because you have someone else who needs to come in the door. The need is great and the resources are few.

(Interview #2)

There is an ongoing struggle for funding that characterizes the service landscape in Ottawa, and despite excellent efforts at collaboration and resource sharing there remain gaps and barriers to service provision.

Identified Needs and Barriers to Housing Supports and Services in Ottawa

In earlier drafts of this report, the *needs* of street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa and the *barriers* to service were divided into separate sections, but after further consultation with service providers, peer researchers, and sex workers it became clear that needs and barriers are often blurred. For example, if a woman needs support with an addiction this might also be a barrier to accessing housing due to zero-tolerance policies in some shelters and housing programs³⁸. The remainder of this section will present the needs and barriers identified by service providers and advocacy groups in Ottawa.

Basic Needs

Many service providers talked about the importance of meeting the basic survival needs of street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa and addressed the growth of food insecurity in our community (Kwan 2014b: 4). Access to healthy meals, hygiene supplies, laundry facilities, showers, and safer sex/harm reduction supplies is extremely important to women experiencing homelessness. The Elizabeth Fry Society, Daisy's Drop-In, and all the community health centres in Ottawa provide these services in safe and non-judgmental environments to build rapport with sex workers and to help facilitate referrals to any other supports they might need.

³⁸ The Transition Emergency Shelter Program (TESP) at Shepherds of Good Hope (SGH) is an innovative example of an Ottawa-based, co-ed, low-barrier shelter program. The program is a partnership between SGH, Ottawa Inner City Health, and Ottawa Paramedic Service. The initiative aims to divert people from emergency services, particularly those who are homeless and under the influence of substances, or who may be experiencing acute mental health concerns. Individuals often arrive at the program with police or paramedic accompaniment, or are referred by other shelter programs with zero-tolerance policies. Once inside, they are monitored by medical staff. Once stabilized they can connect directly with staff, including staff specializing in physical and mental health, housing, and employment. The program has become a successful pathway for many chronically underserved individuals to get connected to services including housing services. TESP serves both women and men, and is trans inclusive. Yet there are fewer spaces designated for women compared to men (13 versus 33 beds).

Safety & Privacy

The need for safety and privacy is identified clearly in both the literature on homelessness and by service providers, as many women and street-level/survival sex workers have experienced abuse and trauma throughout their lives. Maintaining personal safety should be a primary element of any housing program and all the housing/shelter services in Ottawa already operate under this assumption. Self-contained units that allow for supported, yet independent, living is identified as the ideal housing model.

Social Supports

As mentioned earlier in this report, women experiencing homelessness tend to have smaller support networks and/or make little use of the supports that they do have in the community. Without adequate social networks, it is difficult for women to find and access appropriate services (Clough et al. 2014). Service providers in Ottawa acknowledge the importance of helping women build and maintain healthy relationships, as isolation only leads to further marginalization and victimization. Unfortunately, this tends to be the most difficult need to address as the women are so accustomed to being alone and taking care of their own survival needs without the help, support, and care from others in the community. Building trust and maintaining respect in a client-centred environment is paramount in meeting this need. Another valuable resource is peer support:

The peer support network is hugely valuable in terms of breaking down the isolation and building a network you can rely on once you get back in the community. It's all well and fine when you are sitting in the shelter but you've got to get back to your life at some point and having friends and a network that you've built that you can rely on is really valuable.

(Interview #2)

Health Care

While there are certainly health services in Ottawa for women and street-level/survival sex workers experiencing homelessness/housing instability, there remains hesitation to visit health care providers due to fear of poor treatment and/or discrimination (Bruckert et al 2006). Stigma, and a lack of sensitivity training for doctors and nurses, blocks access to appropriate health care services. Women are often “hesitant to speak about their occupation or income generating activity with their health care provider which means that they don't get the types of services that they need” (Interview #5).

In the West end of Ottawa, women can access health services from a registered nurse who works at the Carlington Community Health Centre. The presence of the nurse at this location is important in facilitating and increasing the comfort of Daisy's Drop-In participants in accessing primary health care. Brigid's Place (a housing service in the downtown core) has also collaborated

with Ottawa Inner City Health to have a nurse come directly to the house once a week to care for the residents.

Addiction & Mental Health

While not all street-level/survival sex workers are active drug users, research demonstrates a high level of substance use amongst this group (Bruckert et al. 2006). Many communities across Canada, including Ottawa, are starting to recognize the importance of adopting harm reduction strategies – especially considering the ongoing opioid crisis. Service providers in Ottawa acknowledge the need to provide harm reduction supports and many have incorporated this philosophy into their frontline and housing services. Service providers in Ottawa who work with street-level/survival sex workers and women fleeing violence and exploitative situations are also adopting more and more strategies and programs to address mental health concerns.

Resources for Women with Children

There is a recognized need for prenatal and child care services for women experiencing homelessness and women involved in sex work in Ottawa.

In Ottawa, we have implemented a project which has been successful with [the Children's Aid Society] to try to get [them] to do a better job responding to violence against women. They created a differentiated response for survivors of violence, [it is] much less punitive and it's definitely not business as usual with CAS. It's been hugely successful and they have the lowest apprehension rates on that team. You could probably translate that into understanding the realities of women who are involved in the sex trade who may not have parenting issues at all.

(Interview #2)

While there are individuals practitioners in Ottawa providing non-judgmental prenatal care, there is a lack of dedicated services tailored to the needs of pregnant and parenting women who use substances. Many service providers are calling for more support in this area.

Waitlists and Accessibility

Waitlists for housing services and addiction treatment services are identified as a primary barrier for women and street-level/survival sex workers experiencing homelessness in Ottawa.

There is a total shortage of housing – the waiting list is ridiculous, even when you have the highest priority VAW status.

(Interview #2)

When women eventually find and secure housing, there are several accessibility issues that need to be considered, such as transportation and the location of core services and social supports.

There is a ton of resources downtown that people just can't get to without reliable transportation

(Interview #6)

There is a lot of consensus amongst service providers in Ottawa that service hours and program locations pose a barrier to sex workers. There is a clear need for both rural and urban supports and more flexibility in service delivery times that meet the needs of these women. Drop-in centres are named as an ideal resource as they provide a safe and accessible space for immediate respite and care (Bruckert et al. 2006).

Stigma & Discrimination

Whether originating from neighbours, doctors, service providers, the police, or even peers – stigma and discrimination are ongoing barriers to accessing supports amongst sex workers in Ottawa.

There is an assumption that they are all addicts and thieves – social outcasts.

(Interview #3)

You have to get rid of the labels before you can even start talking about respecting women's choices.

(Interview #5)

Almost all the local organizations involved in this project engage in some form of public education and advocacy activities, but there is still a lot of work to be done to balance the needs and concerns of the wider community with those of women and sex workers experiencing homelessness/housing instability.

Shelter Rules and Policies

Most of the service providers interviewed for this local scan agreed that curfew policies, no visitor rules, program requirements, and abstinence requirements do not work to meet the needs of all women and sex workers experiencing homelessness/housing instability.

Most sex workers are working late hours and most sex workers are active drug users... Most residences do not or cannot offer services to women that are active users.

(Interview #1)

There is great support within the community for more low-barrier housing options for women in Ottawa.

Culture & Identity

Each of the key informants spoke to specific groups of women who are underserved in Ottawa, including: Indigenous, racialized, LGBTQ2S+, youth, and immigrant women. There is a great need for services that reflect all spiritual, cultural, and identity needs.

Police

The relationship between the Ottawa Police Services and street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa continues to be a barrier, but there are good efforts within the community to ameliorate this situation. The staff at Brigid's Place and at Daisy's Drop-In have started to develop very good relationships with local police officers and even have liaison officers who are open to communicating respectfully with the women about their rights and personal security.

Staff, Funding & Resources

Lack of adequate resources for frontline staff is cited as a common barrier to service delivery (Biederman & Nichols 2014; Clough et al. 2014; CMHC 2000; Miller & Du Mont 2000; Neal 2004; Walsh et al. 2010; Whitzman 2006). The women who access housing-related services “need understanding – not judgment” (Irwin & Roos 2015: 5) and proper sensitivity training is essential to build trust in the service environment. When women are cared for and empowered through the programs and supports provided, real change happens for both the residents and the wider community.

Having some awareness around mental health, substance use, poverty... The key is the person's attitude - you need to be comfortable and non-judgmental and be able to meet the women where they are at.

(Interview #4)

Most of the service providers want to see frontline staff who ‘meet people where they are at’ – but there seems to be difficulty working in this way, especially with women involved in sex work. Providing individualized and consistent service to each resident can also be difficult due to staff shortages and high turnover rates.

Limited program delivery space is also cited as a barrier. For example, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa has attempted to offer outreach programming at Brigid's Place, at St. Joe's Women's Centre, and at the Vanier Community Centre, but lack of space and overcrowding of services was a barrier each time.

When you are in a situation where there are lots of different services offered at the same location it is not really ideal, and the times may not be ideal. So we've run it at St. Joe's, at Vanier, here, we've gone out to different shelters and run it individually there, and I would say that space and time of services is an issue in Ottawa.

(Interview #1)

Funding is an obvious barrier to service delivery, and one that was mentioned repeatedly throughout the interviews. There is “a long history of playing agencies off each other for fear of scarcity” (Interview #2) and the funding structures themselves are not conducive to program longevity – “it’s about one year, two year projects – finding a solution and moving on” (Interview #3). To overcome this barrier there is a lot of cooperation and resource sharing happening amongst service providers in Ottawa, and many agencies make good use of volunteers and placement students who are eager and willing to work collaboratively with both staff and residents.

Identified Best Practices

Apart from helping to identify the needs of street-level/sex workers in Ottawa and barriers to service, the interviews with key informants at the initial stages of the research project highlighted some best practices to be considered as Ottawa moves forward in developing housing programs and social supports for women experiencing homelessness/housing instability. These best practices include:

- low-barrier housing;
- drop-in centres and ‘one-stop-shops’;
- outreach;
- trauma-informed care;
- transitional/supportive housing and long-term supports; and
- peer support.

What is Working in Ottawa?

Brigid's Place – located in downtown Ottawa – was identified as a good housing model by almost all the key informants interviewed for this report. The women who live at Brigid's Place have many needs and face several barriers in the community, but here they have access to “client centred and flexible services and supports” without the requirement of abstinence (Shepherds of Good Hope n.d).

I've had really good positive feedback from sex workers about Brigid's Place – if I talk to sex workers in Sandy Hill for instance, I've heard just positive things from sex workers themselves.

(Interview #3)

Brigid's Place grew out of a very simple concept: there was an identified need to provide services to women experiencing homelessness in Ottawa and service providers responded to that need. The program is loosely based on *The Vivian*³⁹, a low-barrier housing program in Vancouver that provides services to women experiencing multiple barriers to housing such as mental health and addiction. Most of the women who live at Brigid's Place are referred through the *Hope Outreach* program at the Shepherds of Good Hope, which is a perfect transition for women who are ready to leave the shelter for something more stable.

The defining features of Brigid's Place is the focus on harm reduction and flexible house rules. While the staff and management have adapted the policies over the years to ensure the safety and security of everyone in the program, there is still a focus on creating an atmosphere that is conducive to meeting the needs of the residents. Another strategy employed by the staff at Brigid's Place is collaboration. The women staying at the house have so many different needs that it is necessary to connect with other services in the Ottawa area – such as OASIS, Ottawa Inner City Health, and the Minwaashin Lodge - to have those needs met. Finally, the staff at Brigid's Place have tried to include the women they seek to support in all stages of program development and delivery.

The one really good aspect of it was we involved the women from the beginning. So that was a neat way of doing things that was a little bit different, right? Where the women who are the consumers are advising us and telling us their stories about what works well, what doesn't, what they thought would work better for them. So that was a neat concept.

(Interview #4)

Brigid's Place is an example of what needs to be done to support women sex workers who are experiencing homelessness. Not only does this program provide stability for the residents, but it has also been acknowledged as contributing to the overall health and safety of the surrounding

³⁹ More information about The Vivian available at: <http://www.raincityhousing.org/what-we-do/womens-housing/>

community. Neighbours of Brigid's Place appreciate the services provided and have developed friendly relationships with the staff and the women.

A second program that already exists and is working in Ottawa is **Daisy's Drop-In**. Daisy's is in the Carlington neighbourhood and is the result of a partnership between numerous community programs including the Caldwell Family Centre, Carlington Community Health Centre, the City of Ottawa Recreation and Parks, Crime Prevention Ottawa and Ottawa Public Health. The drop-in program provides sex workers in the area with basic needs (such as food and clothing), harm reduction supplies, access to a nurse for STI⁴⁰ testing, shower and laundry facilities, counselling supports, and referrals to other community agencies. The program operates every Friday morning from 5:00am – 8:00am, but the need for additional services is growing as more and more women in the community learn about the service.

Just as with Brigid's Place, Daisy's developed as a response to a clearly identified need in the community. A woman who lives in the Carlington area was providing informal services to street-level/survival sex workers out of her own home and started to feel overwhelmed with the high demand for supports. A community meeting brought together various agencies, residents, and sex workers to outline the needs and concerns of everyone in the area.

[The women] expressed that the neighbourhood is a war zone, and they just want to be invisible, and that too many sisters are dying needlessly.

(Irwin & Roos 2013: 2)

The main concern in this neighbourhood is safety with theft, robberies, vandalism, drugs and weapons. Solicitation on the street is a concern in part due to traffic issues associated with it.

(3)

After this meeting partnerships developed and some funding was provided for the creation of the drop-in centre.

Several program elements have been identified that contribute to the success of Daisy's, including:

- experienced, non-judgmental, consistent and compassionate front-line staff who focus on meeting the immediate needs of the women;
- a strengths-based approach and a focus on harm reduction;
- the accessible location of the program;
- the flexibility of the program; and
- a focus on outreach and the adoption of a peer support program.

⁴⁰ Sexually transmitted infections.

Just like Brigid's Place, Daisy's has also been well received by the community and neighbours are appreciative of the supports being provided. The program addresses a number of health and safety needs of outdoor/survival sex workers, while reducing the 'public nuisance' and visibility concerns that are often expressed by other members of the community.

One of the characteristics shared by Daisy's Drop-In, Brigid's Place, and all the other successful housing-related programs in the Ottawa area is **collaboration**. Without the knowledge and resource sharing that happens behind the scenes, many social programs in this city would not exist. Apart from collaboration between agencies, there is also a movement to collaborate with the individuals using the services in the form of peer support programs. Only good can come from increasing collaboration in the community, and this is pivotal to the success of any new housing programs for street-level/survival sex workers.

What is Missing in Ottawa?

After speaking with service providers in Ottawa about the services available to street-level/survival sex workers, it became clear that despite the supports and services offered across the city to address issues around homelessness/housing instability, there is room for improvement. For example, while several service providers identified the valuable programs provided by Minwaashin Lodge and Centre Espoir Sophie, there is a consensus that more services need to be developed for, and provided to, both Francophone and Indigenous women in Ottawa. Queer and trans people, especially LGBTQ2S+ youth, also require more accessible and flexible supports to address their housing and safety concerns⁴¹.

In terms of the services that are already available to street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa, service providers suggested that some adjustments be made to better meet the needs of these women. There is a shortage of services available during the times when sex workers need them most and there are certain areas of the city that are completely underserved. Additionally, there is concern around timely access to services (such as addiction treatment programs) and zero tolerance policies that prevent many women from accessing much needed shelter and safety supports.

The service providers and advocates that we spoke to for this phase of the project also indicated an ongoing need for public education initiatives that address the stigma and discrimination faced by street-level/survival sex workers. There is a strong desire to improve the relationships between sex workers and the Ottawa Police Service and to address other systemic issues and structural barriers that contribute to the marginalization of street-level/survival sex workers.

Service providers indicated that there is a **complete** lack of safe and affordable housing in the City of Ottawa – specifically for women and even more specifically for women involved in street-level/survival sex work. Due to this deficit, Ottawa needs to dedicate time and resources to developing housing programs that meet the needs of women experiencing homelessness/housing instability. Service providers suggest that an important first step in filling this service gap is **listening to and involving sex workers** in future program development and delivery.

⁴¹ Currently, LGBTQ2S+ youth in Ottawa access services and supports from programs like Family Services Ottawa, Youth Services Bureau, and the Ten Oaks Project.

Next Steps

Sex workers are members of our communities. They are working people, they are neighbours, they have families and they share the same commitment to community safety.

(POWER & PIVOT 2015: 9)

Our biggest mistake would be not including the women.

(Interview #4)

The model is there, I think the only gap we have is that we are not talking to sex workers – we need to talk to sex workers and then from there we really need to - rather than replicating research - let's put in place some of these support services.

(Interview #3)

As highlighted by the project's Steering Committee, and previously in this report, it was vital that the next step of this project be to engage with the women in our community who require housing-related supports. We must acknowledge the "heterogeneity of homelessness" (Watson 2011: 639) and start forming a more detailed understanding of the specific needs and concerns of street-level/survival sex workers experiencing homelessness/housing instability in Ottawa. There is no such thing as a 'one-size-fits-all' solution and "at the end of the day we are going to have to just try it and see what works" (Interview #2). There is already a general understanding that "sex workers need the same kind of services as any other citizen" (Interview #5) and the first step to accessing those services is to provide access to safe housing.

Give people housing, make them safe.

(Interview #1)

Part III: The Research Project

In January of 2016 the project's third phase began, that of the research project. The aim of this phase was to hear from street based/survival sex workers themselves about their experiences of safety and housing in Ottawa. To begin, the project's two research assistants met to design draft focus group and interview guides⁴². These guides drew on existing relevant guides published from other Canadian jurisdictions and informed by the literature review and scan of best practices (see Part I and Part II of this report), and included questions that were intended to assess housing safety, including sense of belonging and community connectedness, for women engaged in street-level/survival sex work in Ottawa. The draft guides were then presented at a Steering Committee meeting for review and feedback. The Steering Committee offered much constructive criticism of the draft documents and strongly suggested that peer researchers (i.e.: people with lived experience of survival sex-work) be recruited to the project before moving forward.

Peer Researchers

Peer researcher recruitment was facilitated by front-line workers, including those on the Steering Committee. In total, four peers joined the team, including one youth peer researcher and one Indigenous peer researcher. Peers were paid \$25/hour, equal to the researchers' hourly wage, in recognition of their competence and to minimize power imbalances.

Peer expertise was crucial in revising the focus group and interview guides. Peers helped assess the appropriateness and potential effectiveness of questions. A demographic questionnaire⁴³ was also designed in consultation with peers that assessed socio-economic variables, including: current housing status, income level, ethnicity, and LGBTQ2S+ identity. Peers determined a fair participant honorarium (\$25 cash), based on the time requested of participants (approximately 30-45 minutes) and the intensity of questions asked.

Ethics

The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB) at Carleton University. All participants provided their written consent to participate in the process, including consent⁴⁴ to have the focus group and/or interview audio-recorded and transcribed. Eligibility criteria included woman-identified, 18 years or older, and current or near-current experience of street-level/survival sex work. Unfortunately, the procedural difficulty of obtaining REB approval to do research with young people (i.e.: minors) who sell sex, meant the team made the choice to forego interviewing participants younger than 18 years. It is recognized that this is a major deficit of the research, confirmed by the youth peer researcher(s) and the younger project participants.

⁴² See Appendix I for the Focus Group Guide and Appendix II for the Interview Guide

⁴³ See Appendix III for the Demographic Questionnaire

⁴⁴ See Appendix IV for the Consent Form

Recruitment

Participant recruitment was a primary task of the peer research team, as peers had the social networks to facilitate the required connections. In the beginning months, all participants were recruited through peer word-of-mouth. In the later months, posters were put up in harm-reduction spaces within some of the city's community health centres. Recruitment was also aided by several outreach workers in the city. Initially, the research team aimed to interview 50 participants, a number largely informed by peer researchers who felt that was a reasonable and realistic target when considering the demographics of street-level/survival sex work in Ottawa. Several factors made it difficult to complete 50 interviews. This will be discussed in greater detail below. Nevertheless, when all the interviews were completed, the research team felt that they had interviewed a diverse sample of people and that the data had reached a point of saturation. In total, 29 women with lived experience and three service providers were interviewed for this phase of the research project.

Focus Groups and Interviews

All focus groups and many of the one-on-one interviews were conducted at drop-in programs throughout the city including Daisy's Drop-In, NESI, Purple Bridges, and Brigid's Place. One-on-one interviews were conducted in locations convenient to individual participants, including coffee shops, outdoor public spaces, and, where possible, participants' homes. All focus groups had a peer researcher and research assistant present. Peer researchers acted as facilitators/interviewers, while the research assistants acted as backup support, asking participants clarifying questions where helpful. Some of the one-on-one interviews were conducted in a similar fashion, but about half were conducted with only one member of the research team present (i.e.: a research assistant only). That was done to accommodate the tight scheduling of interviews and to optimize privacy where interviews were being conducted in participants' homes.

Participation

As mentioned previously, we connected with 29 individual women for this phase of the research project, with nine participating in focus groups and 24 participating in one-on-one interviews; 4 of the women participated in both a focus group and an interview. Table 3 (see below) provides further information about how and where women participated in the project.

Table 3: Participation in Focus Groups and Interviews

Type of Interaction	Location	Number of Participants
Focus Group	Brigid's Place	3
	Daisy's Drop-In	2
	NESI (Somerset West CHC)	4
One-On-One Interview	Purple Bridges	7
	Daisy's Drop-In	5
	NESI	3
	Coffee Shop	3
	Outdoors	3
	Participant's Home	3

We also interviewed three service providers for this phase of the research project. After circulating a request for interview participants through the Steering Committee mailing list, representatives from Daisy's Drop-In, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa, and Brigid's Place expressed interest in participating. Service providers were asked the same questions posed to street-level/survival sex workers and were guided to reflect on these questions and share answers based on their general experiences working in the community.

Challenges

The interview guide was not formally piloted; but after conducting three focus groups and reviewing the transcripts, the team revised a few questions for clarity and to eliminate redundancies. A second application was made to the REB, incorporating the revised interview guide. Though there had been significant project momentum up until that point, there was a delay while waiting for REB re-approval that decreased project energies. In hindsight, assessing the effectiveness of the interview guide should have happened at an earlier stage in the research process to avoid interruptions of this kind.

While facilitating a focus group with service providers would have been preferable to conducting separate one-on-one interviews, it was difficult to coordinate schedules amongst all interested participants. This alone speaks to the hectic nature of frontline service provision and demonstrates difficulties in information sharing and service coordination across the city of Ottawa.

Gaps in Recruitment & Potential for Future Research

While women spoke about the many services and supports available in Ottawa that add to their sense of safety and wellbeing, a clear gap in our research was noted by the youth peer researcher on our team. As a Franco-Ontarian youth and someone who has resided in Vanier all her life, she made clear to our team that Francophones, especially youth, are accessing a different range of services than their English-speaking peers. She suggested useful strategies for targeted outreach to Francophone communities but unfortunately our participant outreach time was nearing a close and we simply ran out of time to do Francophone-specific interviews. This is a clear shortcoming of the project, but suggests avenues for future research.

An unexpected outcome of recruitment, particularly when posters were placed in drop-in spaces throughout the city, was that several men⁴⁵ engaged in sex work came forward hoping to participate in the project. Though they did not meet the eligibility requirements of this project, it indicates that future research specific to men involved in street-level/survival sex work should be considered.

Collaborative Analysis

Collaborative analysis of the narratives gathered through focus groups and interviews was ongoing throughout the data collection and writing phases of the project. The research team (including the peer researchers) met at various points to discuss the emergent themes and started to think about potential recommendations to present in this report. Once again, the peer researchers were invaluable to this collaborative work as their knowledge and experience allowed them to view the data from a different (and often more critical) lens.

⁴⁵ Five requests from men sex workers were made, but we are not able to confirm that these were five unique phone calls. Recruitment posters listed the phone numbers of both research assistants, therefore, it was not possible for the research assistants to verify, based on phone conversations only, how many unique contacts were made.

Part IV: Key Findings

Demographics

Demographic information was collected from each participant prior to their participation in the focus group and/or one-on-one interview.⁴⁶ This provides quantitative information on respondents' characteristics: age, ethnicity, sex and gender identity, housing history, income, etc. Demographic highlights are summarized below in Table 4.

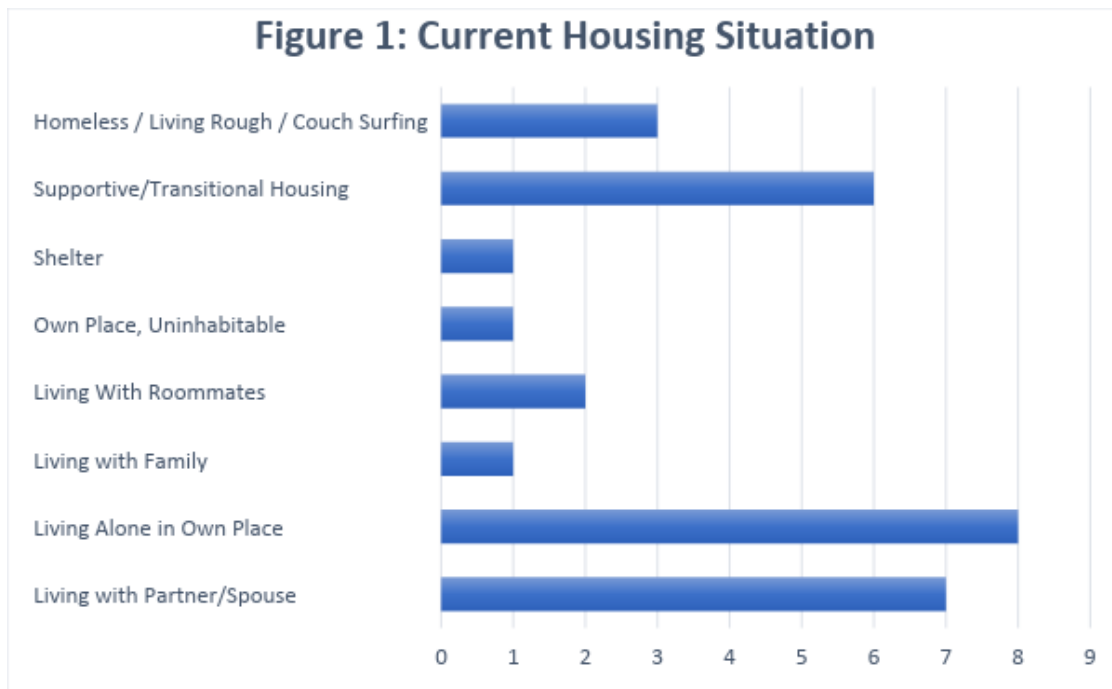
Table 4: Demographic Highlights

Demographic Characteristics of Sample - N=29					
Canadian Citizen?					
Yes	No				
28	1				
Age					
18-25	25-34	35-54	55-74		
2	10	12	5		
Ethnicity					
White	Hispanic	Black	Indigenous/First Nations	Metis	Inuit
22	1	1	3	1	1
Marital Status					
Single / Never Married	Married / Common Law	Divorced	Separated	No Response	
15	9	2	2	1	
Education					
K-8	Some high school, no diploma	High school diploma/GED	Some college, no degree	Bachelor's degree	Graduate degree
2	18	5	2	1	1
Approximately Monthly Income from all Sources					
\$500	\$500-\$999	\$1000-\$1499	\$2000 or more		
3	10	11	5		
Receiving Social Assistance					
Yes	No				
26	3				

⁴⁶ See Appendix III for the demographic questionnaire.

In total, we spoke to 29 women street-level/survival sex workers, 24 of whom have lived in Ottawa for more than ten years and therefore have a good understanding of the city and the service landscape. Twelve women lived/were staying in the downtown core – mostly in the Centretown area – while eight women lived/were staying in the west end (Carlington), eight in the east end (Vanier) and one woman was in the Gatineau/Hull region.

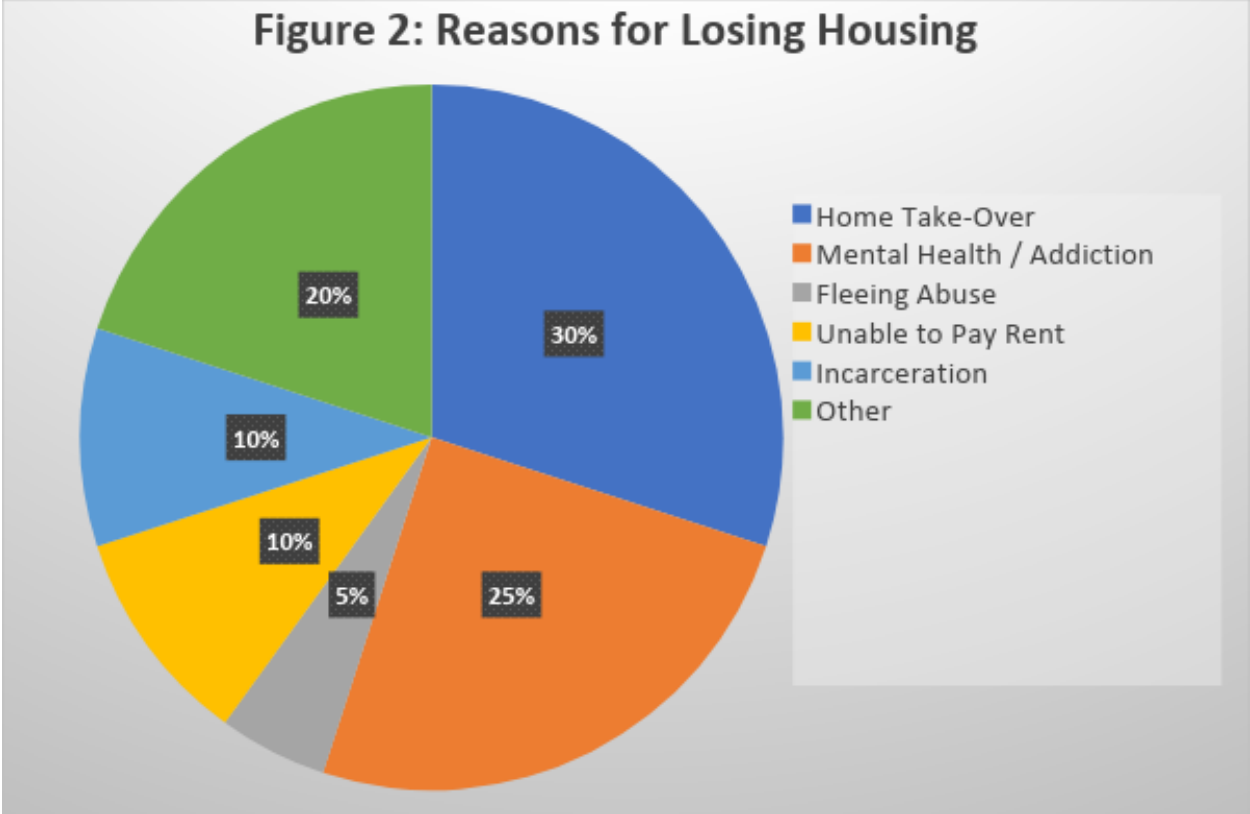
In terms of age group, 17 of the women we spoke with were over the age of 35, while only two women were between the ages of 18 and 24. Of 29 respondents, 24% identified as Indigenous (n=5) or racialized (n=2) and 21% (n=6) identified as LGBTQ2S+.



Within the demographic questionnaire, we also asked about housing history⁴⁷. At the time of the interviews only one woman was accessing a shelter bed, while 19 women stated that they had some form of independent housing; yet all but three of the women had experienced homelessness/housing instability in the past five years. Women’s total length of time living on the streets or in shelters ranged from never, to several months, to on-and-off their entire lives. In the past five years, women found themselves housed then homeless again anywhere from zero to five times.

⁴⁷ The research team made alterations to the questionnaire in May 2016, adding questions about housing history – therefore, only 15 of the 29 participants answered questions 14 through 17.

Reasons for homelessness included “housing takeovers” (i.e.: unwanted guests), abusive partners, inability to pay rent, incarceration, death in the family, mental health or substance use issues, and/or leaving home at an early age (see Figure 2).



Overview of Key Findings

Importantly, the findings in this third phase of the research project were congruent with the literature and scan of practices (Part I and Part II of this report). The major findings truly speak to the housing and safety needs of street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa and indicate a need for the following:

- **Affordable & Well-Maintained Housing:** A major theme discussed by every project participant, and reinforced by the literature, was the overall unaffordability of well-maintained housing which oftentimes forced women to trade sex for a place to stay or necessitated reliance on abusive partners for shelter.
- **Low-Barrier, Supportive/Transitional Housing:** Across Canada and within Ottawa, successful housing models are those that meet women “where they are at” and do not present prerequisites such as the absence of mental health and substance use issues for access to this type of housing.
- **Housing for Women and Women-Led Families:** Though only two women spoke about currently raising young children, others discussed adult children who were in their lives. Too often, housing models force women to live removed from their family networks and do not recognize the totality of their personal and familial bonds.
- **Protection from Housing Takeovers:** A significant finding of this project was women’s experiences of eviction due to so called “housing takeovers.” Because street networks are very tightly knit and people hold strong allegiances to one another, many women felt guilty for not sharing their housing when others remained without. Often invited guests overstayed their welcome, stole from women, or created disturbances in the building, causing women to be evicted.
- **Better Relationships with the Police:** Women were not unanimous in their feelings of safety regarding the police. Overall, younger project participants were less positive in their assessment of the police, whereas older women said relationships had improved over time. Study findings indicate trust can be built through dedicated time and investments, as demonstrated through the success of police liaison programs.
- **Evaluation of the Impact of Incarceration and Criminal Records on Access to Housing:** Many street-level/survival sex workers have histories of incarceration and/or criminal records. During periods of incarceration social assistance payments are halted, putting women at risk of eviction. Once women have criminal records it becomes increasingly difficult to find new housing, as many landlords require criminal record checks as a condition of tenancy.

- **Additional Peer-Led Outreach and Community Supports:** Project participants described a broad range of experiences related to outreach and community supports. Many women were not connected to any formal services and expressed frustration at their ability to get connected. Others frequently accessed formal supports, like those offered by outreach and drop-in programs, and even described these programs as “family.” Peer support was highlighted as a crucial part of the continuum of care.
- **Better Access to Healthcare:** For street-level/survival sex workers, stigma and discrimination are barriers to proper healthcare. Moreover, women sex workers are limited in their ability to access healthcare—especially in unfamiliar neighbourhoods—because they tend to be strongly rooted to particular urban areas which lack transportation, and/or experience stigma when moving through the city. Women were more likely to seek healthcare supports from multi-purposed agencies they already know and trust (e.g. NESI, Daisy’s Drop-In, or Brigid’s Place). These places offer non-judgemental, sex worker positive healthcare that has made notable differences to women’s overall health and wellbeing.
- **A Focus on Neighbours and Neighbourhood:** The importance of community connectedness for women was a major finding of the project. Women overwhelmingly felt safe in a limited number of places, and rarely ventured further from these comfort zones. The importance of amenities (e.g.: grocery stores and other shops, social services, community centres) to a neighbourhood was emphasized repeatedly.

Accessible/Affordable and Well-Maintained Housing

A. Accessibility & Affordability

The need for housing that was both accessible and well-maintained was stated repeatedly throughout the project. Altogether, women involved in street-level/survival sex work fall along different stages of the housing continuum, but even the most stably housed was vulnerable to homelessness due to chronic poverty. Though participants’ incomes varied, after paying rent each month they generally had no more than a couple hundred dollars to spend on food and other necessities and ultimately, these women relied on income from sex work to cover their basic costs of living.

Another barrier women experienced in accessing good quality housing was an inability to pay a deposit for first and last months’ rent. One participant said that before she was housed she transitioned from complete homelessness to living in a hotel. While she could come up with money for a hotel room each night, it had been hard to find something more stable. Eventually she found an apartment through a friend who lived in the same building. Other women also relied on friends and clients to *borrow* money for first and last months’ rent. Because all but one woman interviewed was living in poverty, with unstable incomes and no access to family wealth, their ability to find and keep quality housing was limited.

B. Maintenance

If women *had* housing, it was often substandard in terms of general building maintenance. Across a variety of living situations (e.g.: shelters, transitional housing facilities, government subsidized housing, and market rentals) women echoed their experiences with:

- Pests (bed bugs, cockroaches, rodents, body lice)
- Broken appliances
- Mold
- Use of harsh chemicals

One woman who was living with a chronic breathing condition described how mold and bed bugs were harming her health. In her case, the pests and mold were so bad that she felt unable to be in her own apartment. However, she also feared being “blacklisted” if she made a complaint against her landlord. As a result, she was waiting for her lease to run out, paying rent on an apartment she was unable to use, while staying at her partner’s place – someone she described as emotionally abusive. Despite technically having housing, she and many other women, were in fact very vulnerable to homelessness due to unhealthy and unsafe living conditions. Despite formal channels like the Housing Tribunal that allows women to file complaints against landlords, major power imbalances remain.

With inattentive landlords unwilling to address property maintenance issues, some participants were forced to improvise repair solutions themselves. Women described caulking cracks and patching holes to keep the pests out and putting out diatomaceous earth to eliminate existing bed bugs. Many women felt that landlords maintained properties only to the extent that they could get units rented. For example, one woman’s landlord was fixing up the vacant unit next door, but would not address her broken stove. She said, “It’s kind of like...‘Ha, I’ve got you on a lease now, I don’t have to fix it anymore.’” However, some women were satisfied with their landlords’ general willingness to address building concerns. One woman who was especially pleased noted that the on-site property maintenance person was invested in a well-kept building because he also lived there.

Low-Barrier, Supportive/Transitional Housing

Overwhelmingly, women supported the idea of low-barrier, supportive/transitional housing, though there was some disagreement about the specifics of what that should or could entail. The study participants that were living at Brigid’s Place agreed that this type of housing contributed to their overall safety and wellbeing.

A. Brigid’s Place

Brigid’s Place is Ottawa’s only housing program geared specifically to women involved in street-level/survival sex-work. It is operated by the Shepherds of Good Hope but is a stand-alone residential home with modest sized private rooms for 11 women and shared common spaces,

including a kitchen and living room. A portion of residents' social assistance cheques go directly to rent and the household food budget; all meals are provided. Women are permitted to use substances in the privacy of their bedrooms and harm reduction supplies are available on site. Typically, the women are not permitted to have guests visit unless they have earned guest privileges by participating in various household chores. Staff are also available 24/7, and assist with case management, meal preparation, and general household upkeep.

For this project, we were curious to understand how women felt about Brigid's Place specifically, or to the general concept of low-barrier, supportive/transitional housing for women. We asked all interview participants their thoughts on the matter, regardless of whether they had personally resided there. Many participants were, in fact, current or past residents of Brigid's. Some had lived there for only a few months and some had been there for several years.

Women who currently lived at Brigid's largely agreed the program contributed to their overall safety and wellbeing. When asked to identify some of the best things about living at Brigid's, we heard the following responses:

- Affordable
- Flexible
- Basic needs are met (stability)
- Good support from on-site staff
- Focus on harm reduction

"The rent. The freedom. I'm able to use if I want to without being bothered by anybody asking me for some. There's always food. You know, you never go without, toilet paper, all of that."

Other participants spoke to the difficulties of communal living, especially when many residents are living with varying degrees of mental health and substance use issues. Regular changes in occupancy was also cited as an issue:

"All of a sudden there's like couple of new people that move in and the house turns all upside down. Like nobody gets along and there's always fights, disagreements, and you know, mental and physical behaviour which shouldn't be, and it makes things a little harder to live and be happy living anyhow."

i. Harm Reduction

Many women described the stability that Brigid's added to their lives. At least one interview participant said her substance use had gone down considerably since moving into the building. Homeless for many years before moving to Brigid's, she said she previously got high to stay awake and alert when she had no place to rest. Now that she was housed at Brigid's she used approximately once a month, a significant decrease from before. This same woman had also not

engaged in sex work for many months since moving into the house. She said she now spends her time mostly at home, relaxing on the back deck. Notably, for women who experience multiple barriers to housing because of street-involvement, or mental health and substance use issues, a low-barrier program like Brigid's can help create greater stability in their lives.

ii. House Rules

Current and former residents of Brigid's were also mixed about having staff on-site and the general enforcement of house rules. Some women seemed to prefer the relative quiet that Brigid's offered from life on the streets, while others wished they could invite guests over, including clients.

iii. Transitional Housing

Brigid's is a transitional housing program that is intended to be a stepping-stone for women moving along the housing continuum. After speaking with the interview participants, they did seem to agree that Brigid's fills that role for women vulnerable to homelessness. However, the difficulty for many women who have lived at Brigid's was the transition to independent housing. First, the poverty rates of social assistance make it difficult to find decent housing, especially if women must budget for food. Because all residents' basic needs are met at Brigid's, women may also find that their survival sex work increases after moving out, to cover the costs of daily life. Another woman said that the transition from Brigid's to independent housing was hard because she appreciated the built-in community of women at the home.

"Like I can always open up my door and know that there's a face on the other side of it, you know. That kind of keeps me going... That's pretty much about the only real reason that I haven't went and got another apartment, is because I don't want to be alone."

Another woman who did once move out of Brigid's said she had to move back after her apartment was taken over. As a transitional housing program, it seems that Brigid's provides women a safe place to find their footing, and is one that they can return to if need be.

iv. Location

The location of Brigid's Place seemed to stir emotions for many interview participants, including those who lived in the building and others who had simply heard of it. In total, there was wide variation across participants around which neighbourhoods were most and least safe for women involved in street-level/survival sex work. Participants who were quite familiar with the Byward Market and/or Vanier felt most safe living in or near those communities. Women who lived outside of those areas (and in areas like Centretown or Carlington) tended to be fearful of the violence that occurs in those places. One woman who did not live at Brigid's generally liked the idea of the program but said she would not feel safe in its current location, as it would be a trigger for substance use. Another woman called for more transitional housing programs like Brigid's, suggesting one be built in Vanier, a neighbourhood with even greater need and a larger gap in

services for street-level/survival sex workers. Lastly, it became clear during the interviews that women in the Carlington area could benefit from a low-barrier, transitional housing model like Brigid's Place.

In total, interview participants had varying degrees of familiarity with low-barrier, supportive/transitional housing specifically geared to women and even more specifically for street-level/survival sex workers. While many of the women we spoke to had first-hand experience with transitional housing, either living in Brigid's currently or in the past, there was still no consensus on how transitional housing should be implemented on the ground. People had a range of feelings about the ideal location for such a program, its staff structure, and the rules for tenants. Interestingly, the things that many participants valued most about Brigid's (i.e.: the meals, location, on-site support, and harm-reduction framework) were the very same things that other women critiqued. Of course, this demonstrates the individuality of women at risk of homelessness and the range of housing options required to meet their needs.

Housing for Women and Women-Led Families

The unifying message from these interviews is the need for women to have agency over their living situations. Choice is important, and currently constrained as they are with very low-incomes, these women are simply unable to find or choose housing that will best meet their needs.

In recognition of women's broader identities as mothers, partners, and caregivers, we hoped to speak to participants about housing models that would best meet their family's unique needs. While only one project participant was raising children full-time, several other women did speak of children who lived with them at least part of the time, or who were adults but visited them on occasion. As well, many participants lived with partners some or all of the time. Taken together, these findings signal the need for housing strategies that acknowledge women, not simply as individuals, but as people bonded to others in important ways.

One young woman we interviewed had full-time parenting responsibilities and so we talked about housing models that could best meet the needs of her and her family. Currently this participant was living in an apartment with her partner, infant, and older child. She described a lack of space and was searching for a new apartment. However, her biggest barrier in accessing housing that better matched her family's needs was their inability to come up with first and last months' rent. She said she would benefit from a housing caseworker and suggested that Ottawa better advertise its available housing supports (e.g.: poster in public places around town). She liked the idea of a centralized location, with one-stop-shop housing assistance. Together we also spoke of programs like Vancouver's Budzey building. The Budzey helps women and their families liaise with external community agencies and resources, and offers other supports like peer based programming, and community kitchen nights.

Many women talked about their desires for housing that could be more than just a roof overhead, but also a place with built-in mechanisms for community and wellbeing. One woman suggested shared common spaces or facilities for healthy recreation.

Another woman who was dependent on the housing of her emotionally abusive partner said that she could benefit from rental assistance (i.e.: with a Housing First approach). She reported that she had completed the SPDAT (the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) about a year ago but had not yet received any updates. She was not keen, however, on the idea of low-income housing because she felt it was not a safe space for her.

Protection from Housing Takeovers

A. Reasons for Takeovers

45% of participants described the necessity to guard their homes from unwanted visitors. One interview participant explained that problems often emerged from good intentions, when women attempted to help friends, family, and acquaintances who lacked housing themselves. Because of the cohesiveness of street-involved communities, many women wrestled with feelings of guilt when they finally found housing but others did not. One woman explained:

“Because I felt sorry for them, you know. But I have a roof over my head, why can’t they at least have one rest?”

B. Consequences of Unwanted Guests

Unfortunately, these visitors often brought problems in the form of theft, violence, or bed bugs. In some cases, women had previously been evicted due to these so called “housing takeovers.” One participant warned:

“If you’re vulnerable to drugs, they’ll take over your home and sell dope out of it.”

Older women seemed particularly familiar with these sorts of scenarios with one woman saying:

“I’ve lost so much stuff from my house, you know. They just take... they just took what they want. They don’t even ask. And I used to tell them, ask me if you want something. You know, I’ll give it to you, but don’t steal from me you know.”

C. Privacy and Setting Boundaries

Having experienced so many disappointments with an open-door policy, many older women became increasingly private with their current housing. One woman refused to tell her own daughter where she lived because she said her daughter would end up bringing clients over. Another younger woman who lived with her partner—in their first place together after

homelessness—said that they preferred to keep their location a secret after receiving no help from others when they were down and out.

Women did differ from one another in that some linked safety to a sense of privacy at home, while others felt safer when surrounded by community. One woman felt safe at home specifically because she interacted with no one and maintained a low-profile in the building. She stated, “I don’t even say hi to anybody. I’ve been there three years.” Other women, however, preferred the company of family and friends at their homes. A couple of older women had grown children that would visit periodically. One participant whose older son would visit from time to time worked to keep her apartment free of other guests (i.e.: clients and other working women), just in case her son stopped by. She acknowledged she could make a lot of extra money by allowing other women to work out of her apartment but she chose not to.

D. Indoor Work Spaces

Having access to dedicated indoor work space increases levels of safety for street-level/survival sex workers. However, women are at risk of eviction when working from home, which further compromises safety. Several women with independent housing did choose to work from their apartments. These scenarios seemed to function best when women lived in very small buildings with fewer neighbours, or neighbours who were themselves street-involved in some way. Other independently housed women felt that working from home was too risky in terms of the potential for eviction. Only one participant could afford a dedicated work space separate from her living space. However, her situation differed in many ways from all other participants as she was the only participant not living in poverty (she had access to family wealth). Generally, safer indoor work spaces were beyond the reach of almost all other participants.

The interviews highlighted the challenge street-level/survival sex workers have in maintaining housing. Ultimately, women are safer if they can work and/or use substances indoors. However, doing so puts them at risk of eviction if there is too much door traffic. Furthermore, having frequent guests often means women no longer have a sense of agency over their space, with guests sometimes stealing from them, being violent, or bringing bed bugs. These are difficult challenges for women to negotiate. But ultimately what we heard from participants was an unwillingness to call the police in the case of a “housing takeover.” Women who had experienced housing takeovers previously felt exhausted by the experience, but wanted the ability to determine the conditions of their living environments for themselves. Finally, because street-involved communities have long-strained relationships with the police, it would be very difficult for women to maintain their friendships if they sought police help during a housing takeover.

Relationships with the Police

As mentioned in the introduction and literature review of this report, tensions between sex workers and the Ottawa Police Service are nothing new and this tenuous relationship has contributed to general safety concerns for individuals and communities. While the dynamics of this relationship are not the focus of this report, the research team felt that it was important to explore questions about the police as they relate to housing. We asked each of the women (as well as the service providers) if the police help or hurt in maintaining housing and feelings of safety and inclusion, and the responses indicate both progress and stagnation.

A. Age Differences

The first thing we noticed was the different attitudes towards police expressed by older women versus their younger peers. One conversation during a focus group perfectly demonstrates these opposing attitudes and experiences:

Older Woman: “They’re nice here and they’re not... I don’t like police. I’m not saying I like them but they are nicer, much nicer now than they were before. They used to harass us before... They used to have stings to try to arrest us. They were mean to us. They would frisk us, search us. Now it’s to the point where they’re actually not even allowed to holler, talk to us or anything around anymore... Almost like they see us now as the victims, you know what I mean, kind of. So it’s kind of cool.”

Younger Woman: *“I hate them. I disagree. I think... but I think they’re more on you if you... like they’re more... if you have conditions or like something like that, then it’s like you’re screwed because they want to just nail you as much as they can.”*

Older Woman: “You really don’t know the way they were before, police... This would be a dream what they are now. They were horrible before. They were mean.”

Another woman also shared her changing experiences with the police, expressing a kind of respect that has developed between her and the officers in the Vanier area.

“They used to hurt me. They used to hurt me big time. But now, I don’t even bother with them. I haven’t seen a cop in seven months except on the street here... But yeah, actually quite a few officers that have been good to me in Vanier...”

B. Culture of Policing & Relationships with Sex Workers

Others pointed to the fact that interactions with the police depend on the individual officer and the circumstances that they are working in at the time of contact, describing more of a “hot and cold” relationship with the Ottawa Police Service. Service providers also noted that the police treat the women differently when they know that they are housed (i.e. at Brigid’s Place) rather than living on the streets or in a shelter. The police view housed women as “less of a nuisance” and trust service providers to effectively deal with potentially harmful behaviour through alternative processes (i.e. harm reduction).

C. Violence and Harassment

Despite these examples of progress, we still heard stories from street-level/survival sex workers that highlight ongoing negative (and sometimes harmful) interactions with the police.

“Cops will follow you or like slow down and like drive behind you and like grill you and make you feel uncomfortable for no reason.”

“I don’t really trust the police either, you know. From past experiences and all that and some of them even ask you if you’re on the street. They’re, oh, they’ll be nice to you and that, but they want information, you know. They put you on the spot.”

One service provider acknowledged the ongoing struggle between sex workers and police officers in Ottawa, but highlighted a police liaison program that was quite helpful to women living in the Carlington area.

“So we've had the opportunity of having a [woman] Ottawa Police Service officer attend Daisy’s... She was able to connect with the women and create kind of a bond with them where they felt... they felt they trusted her...”

“We've lost this police officer due to OPS reconfiguration”

“Oh it was working. Yeah. And you know what? It actually really changed even how the women related to the other police officers... It changed a huge... it was such a benefit and now it's not.”

It is unfortunate to see the underfunding of promising initiatives, like the sex worker liaison program that strengthened the relationship between sex workers and police. This is especially true when women are looking for protection from harm but do not often trust the police to provide them with that protection.

In summary, there is no clear answer when it comes to how the police in Ottawa might help or hinder feelings of safety and security amongst women involved in street-level/survival sex work

in Ottawa. Opinions ranged from the police being helpful in times of crisis to the police being the cause of crisis. What is clear is that there is still a lot of work to do to ensure that these women can trust the police to help them when their housing and personal safety is under threat, but there are some signs of progress in this relationship.

Incarceration and Criminal Records

The women and service providers who participated in focus groups and interviews also spoke to the collateral consequences of criminalization and punishment. Specifically, they shared concerns around the cyclical relationship between incarceration and homelessness. Women involved in street-level/survival sex work often find themselves incarcerated because of their work⁴⁸ or in relation to their substance use. This usually means that they will lose their housing and must start from square one once they return to the community.

“Jail. Yeah. I was in jail for nine months. But when I got out, I was homeless...”

“If women are incarcerated, that has a huge impact in terms of housing. They had a place... you know and then all of a sudden they’re in jail.”

Although there are supports in the community to help women keep their housing while they are incarcerated, or to help them find new housing once they are released, this interruption in stability is difficult. To make matters worse, both women and service providers indicated that more and more private market landlords/housing providers/property managers in Ottawa are now requiring tenants to provide criminal background checks. Women with criminal records are now often screened out of the application process, thereby narrowing the housing options available to them.

“And more and more there’s buildings that are becoming those ‘crime-free’ buildings⁴⁹ where if you have a criminal record you can’t rent.”

If the goal is to safely house women involved in street-level/survival sex work, and to end the cycle of incarceration and homelessness, then we must take into consideration these collateral consequences of punishment and not deny access to housing due to criminal records.

⁴⁸ Once again, although sex workers are no longer targeted by the Ottawa Police Service specifically for transactions related to sexual encounters the women we spoke to were often arrested for other activities including substance use.

⁴⁹ In Ottawa, the police service facilitates a ‘Crime Free Multi-Housing’ program that encourages landlords to conduct criminal background checks on potential tenants. More information can be found on the Ottawa Police Services website: <https://www.ottawapolice.ca/en/safety-and-crime-prevention/Crime-Free-MultiHousing.asp>

Outreach and Community Supports

A. Importance of Community Supports

We noticed a large variance in how street-level/survival sex workers access both formal services and other community supports in Ottawa. Many women lacked strong relationships with service providers for many reasons, including not knowing where to go, being denied services, or having a bad experience with a particular provider. For example, the young woman with full-time custody of her children was only connected to the services of a social assistance worker but felt it was an unhelpful relationship. She offered some suggestions about ways workers could be more responsive to the people they serve.

“They could be more available and I find a lot sometimes a lot of them will judge you. It’s like they’re giving their money away when, yeah, they do that. And like be more... like tell more about what’s available out there to help, because they don’t really say that unless you ask about it or whatnot. But yeah, they could do that.”

Other women shared a very similar appreciation for the importance of community connectedness and were often quite partial to the specific services and supports available in their current neighbourhood. For example, participants in the Carlington neighbourhood were very much rooted to its community of working women and to spaces like Daisy’s Drop-In. In Little Italy and Centretown, women tended to be strongly committed to places like NESI at the Somerset West Community Health Centre. In the ByWard Market/Lowertown area, women spoke most frequently of the safety they felt in spaces like OASIS at the Sandy Hill Community Centre, Brigid’s Place, and the Purple Bridges drop-in. Women, of course, also spoke about accessing services through the mobile outreach vans, like STORM, and through outreach workers like those available through CMHA. In neighbourhoods where fewer formal services existed, women spoke of the street relationships they had, often for many years or even decades. These bonds were crucial for creating a sense of safety and belonging for so many street-level/survival sex workers.

B. Supports for Youth

The younger participants in the project connected to a different range of services than did the older women with whom we spoke. For example, one young woman talked about her experience in an InnerCity Ministries’ art group that runs every Monday night for youth and young adults “at-risk and homeless.” Another younger participant attempted to seek educational supports at Operation Come Home (OCH) only to find that she no longer qualified for services because “they’re for people who are homeless and stuff and they said that [she] was too old.” This participant then sought to enroll in a St. Nicholas Adult High School, but was rejected because she lacked a high school transcript that could verify her previous school attendance. Eventually OCH vouched on her behalf and this participant was proud to report that she was now well on her way to earning her GED – although she was still frustrated by the sense of skepticism and even contempt that many service providers have for people seeking service.

C. Outreach & Informal Supports

A few women who were not connected to a one-on-one worker said they felt that having one could add greater support to their lives.

“To have an outreach worker that I could contact when I need help. Could help me with plastic kits or whatever. Any kind of thing like that. Help me get to appointments, which is, you know, make sure I get to them.”

The young mom we spoke with said she wished she had a worker who could help her with her housing search. This participant said that she had access to a service like this in her previous city but was not aware of anything like this in Ottawa.

“They’d help you sign up for housing and like set up appointments for like to go look at places and even drive you there sometimes. But if there’s something like that here, I don’t know about it.”

For participants who were not well connected to formal services, there was a greater reliance on informal supports in the community, like friends, partners, and family. Often the location of these supports influenced women’s neighbourhood preferences, especially for the young woman who was raising her two children. For her it was invaluable that her mom, sisters, and sister-in-law lived relatively close by and were willing to help with child-care and things like transportation to the grocery store.

D. Peer Support

Peer support was also found to be an *integral* part of the support continuum in Ottawa. For example, members of the peer research team conducted almost all participant interviews and because of their ties to the community, participants felt comfortable to reminisce with them over shared past experiences. Another participant described how valuable it could be to have a counsellor with lived experience. Currently, this participant was eligible for twelve counselling sessions, but felt it would take almost that amount of time to feel comfortable with a social worker whose primary motivation was to “you know, do my good deed and help the poor people.” She suggested a better approach:

“To be able to like sit down like we’re doing right now, but in like a professional setting with like somebody who’s been through the same things as me maybe as well as a professional-professional. Just so, you know, one, I have somebody there to back me up, and have my back...you know, there’s strength in numbers.”

Access to Healthcare

The internalized stigma felt by women involved in street-level/survival sex work, combined with experiences of shame and discrimination, often acts as a barrier to accessing appropriate physical and mental healthcare services. Although this topic did not take up significant space in the discussions we had with women and service providers, the concern around access to healthcare professionals in the community deserves attention – especially as it relates to finding and maintaining housing. For example, one woman we connected with in Vanier acknowledged that housing provides the stability required to prioritize healthcare.

“But I do know a couple of people who are like staying in Brigid’s [Place], right? And it’s been pretty good for them. Like they thrived a lot since going in there. Like they have less health problems. I know one girl who’s getting like... constantly getting like endocarditis and stuff in her heart. And like she’s got like... because she’s there, she could make her doctor’s appointments and get like her treatments and stuff on time.”

A. Housing & Healthcare

Supportive housing programs, like Brigid’s Place, allow for women to focus on their healthcare needs as they are no longer preoccupied with finding a safe place to live or where their next meal is coming from. The staff in housing programs can also help facilitate referrals to health services in the community, ensuring that women are accessing appropriate supports.

B. Accessibility

In terms of services for substance use and addiction, women who live outside of the downtown core complained about having to travel across the city to access supports – specifically, their preferred methadone clinic. The cost of transportation and the discomfort that comes with leaving their communities were the two most common barriers to healthcare mentioned by the participants. Wait times were also cited as a common problem – especially for mental health and addiction treatment programs. Women are appreciative of the nurses and other healthcare practitioners that are available in the community health centres in their neighbourhoods, as this eliminated the issue of transportation. The nurses, doctors, and counsellors are also able to connect directly to the staff at the community health centres who can then remind the women of their appointments and support them in getting to their appointments. Finally, the healthcare professionals who work at the community health centres seem to be more aware and more sensitive to the health concerns of women sex workers. The women feel comfortable around these doctors, nurses, and counsellors and therefore do not hold back on sharing information that is required for a full diagnosis and proper treatment.

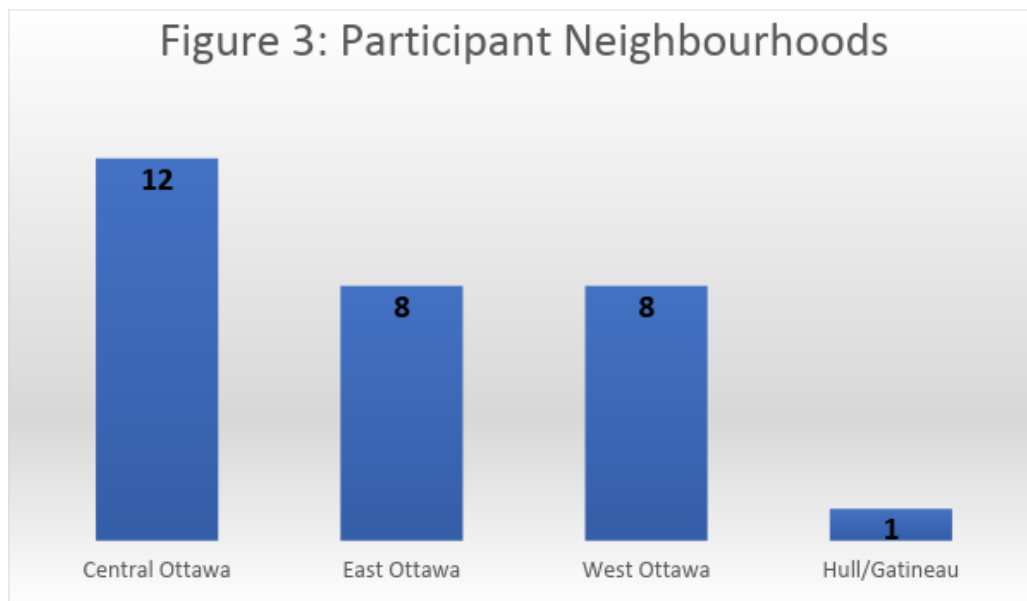
C. Mental Health Supports

Many of the women that we spoke to had a CMHA⁵⁰ worker to help them cope with any mental health concerns. Some were happy with the support that they get from their worker, while others described a more contentious relationship. For the women who were not happy with the level of service from CMHA, they suggested that the workers needed to have offices in the community that were easier to access.

It seemed important for the women that they live in a neighbourhood where health services are easily accessible and available – everything within walking distance increased the likelihood that women would attend appointments consistently and stay on-top of their healthcare needs.

Neighbours and Neighbourhood

An interesting and unexpected finding from our discussions with street-level/survival sex workers and services providers was the connection between neighbourhood and feelings of safety and inclusion. While we expected neighbourhood to play a large role in the day-to-day lives of sex workers, we did not expect to hear how strongly some women felt about the differences that they perceived as existing *between* neighbourhoods and the reasons they gave as to why they prefer to live and work in one area over another. Services and supports certainly vary across Ottawa, and the accessibility to specific programs can sometimes determine where women sex workers choose to live, but the interviews demonstrate other factors that influence safety as it relates to geographic location.



⁵⁰ Canadian Mental Health Association.

As mentioned previously, we spoke to women in several neighbourhoods across Ottawa, including: Vanier, Lowertown, Sandy Hill, Centretown, Little Italy, and Carlington (see Figure 2). We heard a list of ‘pros and cons’ from each of these areas throughout our discussions with participants. For example, we spoke with two women who live in Little Italy and while one described it as “not the best neighbourhood” due to visible drug use around where she is staying, the other woman enjoyed the sense of community she feels because of helpful and attentive neighbours. In this section we highlight Vanier, Centretown, and Carlington as all of the women live and/or access services in these neighbourhoods.

A. Vanier

Vanier was perhaps the neighbourhood we heard most about (both from women that live in the area and those who do not). From some street-level/survival sex workers we heard about improvements in the Vanier area and how it has “really calmed down a lot over the years” and how they feel less bothered by the police and neighbours who might have previously spent a lot of time concerned about their activities. But others shared experiences of “nosey neighbours” who are quick to judge and involve the police in their lives whenever possible. For those who feel safe in Vanier, they connect these feelings to specific people who go out of their way to help them when times are tough. One woman described a business owner who is willing to run a grocery tab for her when money is tight.

“And the Chinese guy. Like he’s really good... he lets us put a lot of things on our bill and we always pay it so we’re always good. Any time I want, if I want something I can go get a pack of smokes and lighter right away. Automatic. And he’ll put it on my boyfriend’s tab or my tab, so I don’t have to worry about it. I can go for anything. Like cat food, cat litter, if there’s something that day I need I can get it.”

Another woman’s preference, and feelings of safety, for Vanier came from living there her entire life and just being familiar with the dynamics of the community.

“This may seem ironic because I live in Vanier and Vanier has this reputation of being dangerous and whatever, but I’ve lived here all my life and this is home to me.”

Women living in other areas of the city identified that they would not like to live in Vanier as they feel it would increase their likelihood of encountering violence and other forms of harm. For some, Vanier (and other areas like Lowertown and the Byward Market) is a trigger for substance use. Some women had never even spent time living or working in Vanier, but they were familiar with the negative reputation of this neighbourhood and that was enough to keep them away.

B. Centretown

While Vanier was often identified as a ‘no-go’ zone for many of the women we talked to, there seemed to be a strong preference for living in Centretown, or, as one women proclaimed, “In the centre of it all!”

“I like Centretown. I used to work there back in the day, but it is so quiet there. Like for me, that would be a good place for me.”

“I like [Centretown]. I lived there before when I first moved here. I like it even more now because it’s quiet... It’s just peaceful. Somewhere you can walk down the road and feel that you don’t have to hold your head down and peeking over your shoulders. It’s a nice spot.”

Women living and working in Centretown feel safe and hope to continue living in Centretown for a wide variety of reasons including: accessibility, clean parks, grocery stores, many restaurants, a concentration of social and health services and an overall sense of community and belonging.

C. Carlington

Several of our participants resided in the Carlington area. Daisy’s Drop-In is a valuable community resource in this neighbourhood. Safety in Carlington comes from the small group of women who work here, who all access the services at Daisy’s, and who look out for each other.

“We watch out for each other and we tend to... we’ll have each other’s backs when it comes down to it. Like yeah, like I mean we do our own thing but we kind of, yeah, we’re there for each other. They’re like... we’re all like sisters, you know, in a small way. We’re like a little family here.”

We even spoke to a woman who lives in Vanier, but comes to work and access the supports in the Carlington neighbourhood because she feels safer here:

“When I come here I feel like that’s my family. I’ve known them forever. I feel so comfortable around them. You know, it’s just home for you.”

One thing that the women did point out about this neighbourhood is the lack of services. Apart from the Daisy’s Drop-In which runs on Friday mornings from 5:00am to about 8:00am, there are few services which specifically serve the needs of street-level/survival sex workers and women are reluctant to leave the area to access the services that they need. One service provider shared a concern with us about this:

“So [Carlington is] their comfort zone. A lot of them grew up here and a lot of them have basically lived here their whole lives and have never really left the neighbourhood very much...And there is a sense of community amongst [the women] as well. You know, like they know each other. They kind of keep an eye out for each other...

...The worst part... like it just keeps them in the cycle. Like it keeps them in their comfort zone and I always say like if you want to make changes, get used to being uncomfortable and that’s a reality...it's been a bit of a barrier and a bit of a challenge because some of them would definitely benefit from that kind of, you know, supportive living. I mean the dream is to have [a Brigid’s] in Carlington, right?”

Policy makers should be mindful of these neighbourhood preferences and dynamics as new programs and services are developed for street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa. Women do not always want to travel or move to the downtown core to access the services they need to stay safe and healthy. Rather, they would like to see new services in the areas where they already live and work thereby providing stability in their lives.

Part V: Summary and Conclusions

This three-phased community-based research project gathered data from literature, service providers, and from women sex workers with lived experience of homelessness. These sources collectively highlight several issues facing street-level/survival sex workers in terms of safety and housing. Overwhelmingly under-housed and living in poverty, street-level/survival sex workers are at increased risk of violence and poor health. They are often forced to sleep rough, couch surf, or stay with abusive partners as traditional shelter and housing services do not adequately meet their needs. Aware that access to decent and affordable housing is correlated to levels of safety and wellness, the City of Ottawa has implemented a 10-year plan to end homelessness. Yet, there is still more work to be done specific to women experiencing homelessness, especially those involved in street-level/survival sex work.

The findings presented in the third section of this report echo what we see in the literature on homelessness and what we heard from service providers who spoke to the local history of service provision for street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa. Women who participated in focus groups and one-on-one interviews reiterated much of what we already knew about issues and gaps in services:

- There is a significant shortage of safe and affordable housing in Ottawa – especially for women and women-led families.
- The barriers to traditional housing services, such as mental health and addiction, are also often the immediate *needs* of many street-level/survival sex workers. Zero tolerance policies for behaviours related to mental health and addiction therefore contribute to further marginalization.
- The impact of stigma and discrimination prevent many street-level/survival sex workers from accessing services in the community, particularly health services.
- There is a lack of adequate housing and housing-related services for homeless youth who also do sex work.
- Peer-led services are an invaluable resource and there is a need for more outreach and drop-in services that are run by current and former street-level/survival sex workers – contributing to a more holistic approach to housing services across Ottawa.
- Tensions still exist between street-level/survival sex workers and the Ottawa Police Service, but there are some examples of improvement in these relationships.

We also heard (from both street-level/survival sex workers and service providers) about what is working in Ottawa:

- Brigid's Place – a low barrier, supportive/transitional housing program – came out on top in terms of *what works* in providing safe housing for street-level/survival sex workers.
 - There is a need for more housing of this kind in many areas of the city such as Vanier and Carlington.
- One-stop-shops like Daisy's Drop-In and NESI. These are an extremely important resource for street-level/survival sex workers – especially those who are not connected to other traditional supports.
 - Again, there is a need for expanding these services across the city and offering services during times when sex workers need access to them.

While all participants were eager to share their stories with us, many were cautious – especially when talking about *what could be* when it comes to finding safe and affordable housing. Women in the Carlington area were particularly hesitant to think about the future and were more concerned with what they could do right now (i.e. access the services at Daisy's Drop-In) to stay safe as they engage in sex work, use drugs, cope with their trauma, and essentially just try to survive in their neighbourhood. The lack of optimism amongst these women is a sure sign that their needs and concerns have gone unaddressed, and we hope that this report is of use to those in Ottawa who are currently working to remedy this oversight and the gaps in service provision.

The final section of this report contains ten recommendations specific to this research project that, if implemented, will increase street-level/survival sex workers' safety and wellness and ensure ongoing collaboration between service providers, advocates, funders, police, and women with lived experience of homelessness in Ottawa.

Part VI: Recommendations

<p>Low-Barrier, Supportive/Transitional Housing</p>	<p>Brigid’s Place, located in Lowertown, has been clearly identified as a promising practice housing model for women sex workers. This low barrier, supportive/transitional model meets women where they are at and acknowledges the benefit of a harm reduction approach.</p> <p>We recommend additional low barrier, supportive/transitional housing models across the city – specifically in areas that are currently underserved.</p>
<p>Expansion of Services and Drop-In Centres Across Ottawa</p>	<p>We recommend that financial support be directed to programs across Ottawa that are currently supporting street-level/survival sex workers but whose resources are quite limited.</p> <p>For example, Daisy’s Drop-In in the Carlington area currently operates one morning per week and Purple Bridges (a new drop-in/outreach program in Vanier) is operating sporadically due to a lack of resources. Both programs meet a clearly identified need in their respective neighbourhoods and could benefit from more funding to provide more consistent support for women experiencing homelessness/housing instability.</p> <p>Additionally, we recommend expanding these services to other areas of the city where street-level/survival sex workers live (or stay) and work.</p>
<p>Peer Outreach & Peer-Led Programs</p>	<p>As stated several times throughout this report, peers⁵¹ are invaluable to any project that aims to support street-level/survival sex workers in the community. Ottawa has several ongoing projects that demonstrate the strengths that peers bring to research projects and service delivery models.</p> <p>We recommend that all future programs and initiatives related to the housing and safety needs of sex workers in Ottawa place peers at the forefront to ensure that the lived-realities of these women are acknowledged at all stages of program development and delivery.</p> <p>We also recommend an increase in peer-led outreach programs to effectively support women who do not access traditional services.</p>

⁵¹ Please refer to Appendix V for a piece written by one of the peer researchers on this project – Christine. Her writing reflects the importance of peers to any research that aims to work with vulnerable and marginalized populations.

<p>Housing for Women-Led Families</p>	<p>As Ottawa moves forward with its 10-year plan to end homelessness through a housing first approach, we recommend the development of programs that prioritize housing for women-led families.</p> <p>Housing providers can look to models like the YWCA’s Crabtree Corner⁵² and RainCity Housing’s Budzey Building⁵³ in Vancouver, BC. These housing models are rooted in harm-reduction and acknowledge the reality of women’s lives as mothers, drug users, and/or sex workers.</p>
<p>Knowledge Hub / Best Practices Network</p>	<p>Many organizations across Ottawa provide services to street-level/survival sex workers, but such programs and supports are often unknown by frontline workers / managers in different areas of the city. For example, Crime Prevention Ottawa has an initiative to help people who fall victim to housing takeovers, but not many people (specifically those who lose their housing as a result) are aware of these supports.</p> <p>Therefore, we suggest the development of a knowledge hub / best practices network to increase discussion and collaboration amongst service providers working with street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa.</p> <p>This network could be supported through Crime Prevention Ottawa who has facilitated similar groups in the past, such as the Community Adult Justice Network⁵⁴.</p>
<p>Police Liaison Officers</p>	<p>To address the tenuous relationship between sex workers and police officers in Ottawa, we recommend expanding the police liaison program in neighbourhoods across the city. Throughout this project, we heard (from both sex workers and service providers) the benefits of this police liaison initiative, followed by disappointment that the program had been reduced significantly by the Ottawa Police Service.</p> <p>We recommend that the Ottawa Police Service connect with street-level/survival sex workers and service providers to assess the need for liaison officers in the community that are sensitive to the lived-realities of women and sex workers experiencing homelessness / housing instability.</p>

⁵² YWCA’s Crabtree Corner: <https://ywcavan.org/programs/crabtree-corner>

⁵³ RainCity Housing’s Budzey Building: <http://www.raincityhousing.org/what-we-do/the-budzey-for-women-and-women-led-families/>

⁵⁴ CAJN: <http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca/en/initiatives/cajn>

<p>Evaluate Use of Criminal Record Checks</p>	<p>Ottawa should critically assess the impact of having a criminal record on the ability to find and maintain safe and affordable housing. Many street-level/survival sex workers have criminal/police records that prevent them from accessing housing due to an increase in landlords and property managers across the city that request background checks. These discriminatory policies limit housing options for women who are trying to find a safe place to live, and we suggest reducing reliance on this screening measure when determining eligibility for housing.</p>
<p>Public Education and Anti-Stigma Initiatives</p>	<p>To end harm and discrimination against street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa, we recommend collaboration on public education and anti-stigma initiatives. Such initiatives should be led by sex workers in partnership with practitioners and allies in the community.</p>
<p>Future Research</p>	<p>Future research should consider the experiences of homelessness and housing instability of male street-level/survival sex workers in Ottawa. As mentioned in the report, the research team was contacted by several men who were interested in participating in the interviews but, as the scope of this project was to explore the experiences of women sex workers, we had to turn them away.</p> <p>Future research projects should also focus on the needs of individuals who were not adequately represented in this research project, namely youth, LGBTQ2S+ people, and Indigenous women involved in street-level/survival sex work.</p>
<p>Development of a Community Plan</p>	<p>Ottawa should consider the development of a comprehensive community plan to address the housing and safety needs of street-level/survival sex workers. This would be a collaborative process between all interested stakeholders in the community, but the plan would pay specific attention to the needs, concerns, and lived-experiences of sex workers experiencing homelessness/housing instability. We could look to London, Ontario⁵⁵ for an example of such a community plan. London has recently engaged in a city-wide effort to house street-level/survival sex workers and after only one year they have successfully housed 26 women⁵⁶. Consultation with the <i>Collaboration Advisory Group</i> in London is suggested as a first step in developing a similar community plan for Ottawa.</p>

⁵⁵ London’s Community Plan Regarding Street Level Women at Risk: <https://www.london.ca/residents/homeless-prevention/Pages/Street-Level-Women-at-Risk.aspx>

⁵⁶ “New program finds homes for 26 women”: <http://www.lfpress.com/2017/04/02/new-program-finds-homes-for-26-sex-workers>

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Appendices

Appendix I – Focus Group Guide

Safety and the Sex Trade Focus Group Guide

Questions are read out loud by researchers. Participants are invited to share responses with the group, with researchers using flipchart paper to record answers in brief. (Focus Group will also be audio recorded). Participants may choose not to answer any question.

Focus groups will be scheduled to last approximately 45 minutes.

Questions:

- What are the worst things about the place where you currently live or stay?
- What are the best things about the place where you currently live or stay?
- Do you feel safe in the area where you currently live or stay?
 - Please explain.
- What do you think ideal housing for you would or should look like?
 - Why do you think it would work?
- What kind of housing would be best for you? (i.e.: market apartment, transitional housing with staff, preferred area, etc.)
- Is there an area of the city you would prefer to live? To not live? Why?
- When things are hard, do you have people or places you can go to for support?
- What about the police?
 - Do they help or do they hurt?
- What would help you in supporting your overall health & well-being? (i.e.: making/getting to your appointments, getting your medication, having someone to listen, etc.).
- Is there anything else you would like to share that you think is important for us to know?

Appendix II – Interview Guide

Safety and the Sex Trade Interview Guide

1. Where are you currently living/staying?
 - a. How long have you been there?
 - b. If currently homeless – Where do you stay? What about during the winter?
2. Can you tell me a bit about your current housing situation?
 - PROMPTS: Do you live alone or with others? In a room or apartment? Is the building clean/well maintained? Do you pay the full rent or is there a subsidy? What is included in the rent? Are there staff / security in the building? Are there rules in place (i.e. zero tolerance, curfew)? Is your housing part of Ottawa Community Housing? Ottawa Rooms?
 - a. What are the worst things about the place where you currently live or stay?
 - b. What are the best things about the place where you currently live or stay?
3. Do you feel safe, secure, comfortable, stable where you are living/staying right now?
 - a. If yes, what/who makes you feel safe?
 - b. If no, what/who makes you feel unsafe? Why do you continue to stay there?
4. Do you feel safe in the neighbourhood where you live/stay?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. What/who makes you feel safe/unsafe?
 - c. Do you have everything you need in your neighbourhood?
 - d. Is there a neighbourhood in Ottawa where you would prefer to live? Why?
 - e. Is there a neighbourhood in Ottawa where you would never want to live? Why?
5. What about the police? Do they help with maintaining housing, housing safety, or overall safety?
6. Have you ever traded sex or drugs for food or a place to stay?
 - a. If yes, ask participant to explain the situation.
 - PROMPTS: How often? (i.e. one night, week, month); Was it someone you knew or a stranger?
7. Do you think your housing situation needs improving? IF YES...
 - a. What do you think are the next steps you need to take for this to happen?
 - b. What kind of supports/services do you think can help you with this?
 - c. What would make this hard to do? What are some of the barriers you have experienced to accessing the kind of housing you want?

8. Do you know about Brigid's Place?
 - a. If yes, ask participant if they would want to live in a place like Brigid's and in which neighbourhood they would like to see housing like this become available.
 - b. If no, explain what Brigid's Place is (transitional, supportive, low-barrier housing for women) and then return to question (a).

9. Do you currently access social services / community services / mental health services on a regular basis? (i.e. OW/ODSP worker, drug court, NESI, STORM, CMHA worker, community health centre, etc.)
 - a. Do these workers/services help you in supporting your overall health, well-being, and personal safety?
 - b. If yes, how do they help?
 - c. If no, what could they do better?
 - d. Do you have other supports in the community? (i.e. friends, family, partner)

10. Do you have anything else you would like us to know about housing and safety?
 - a. If you have any other ideas, want to talk more, get more involved in this project let me know (provide participant with contact information).

Appendix III – Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Information for the Housing, Safety and the Sex Trade Study

How long have you lived in Ottawa?

- All my life
- Less than one year
- Between 1 and 5 years
- Between 5 and 10 years
- More than 10 years
- Prefer not to say

Please indicate the neighbourhood where you currently live/stay:

- Central Ottawa (Byward Market, Centretown, Sandy Hill, Lowertown, Old Ottawa East, The Glebe)
- East End (Lees Avenue, Overbrook, Vanier)
- South End (Heron Gate, Riverview, South Keys, Elmvale Acres, Billings Bridge)
- West End (Britannia, Hintonburg, Mechanicsville, Lincoln Heights, Carlington, Westboro)
- Hull / Gatineau
- Other
 - _____
- Prefer not to say

What is your age?

- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-54 years old
- 55-74 years old
- 75 years or older
- Prefer not to say

Please specify your identified ethnicity:

- White / Caucasian
- Hispanic or Latino
- Aboriginal
 - First Nations
 - Metis
- Other
 - _____
- Prefer not to say
- Black or African Canadian
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Inuit
- Multiple Aboriginal Identities

What is your gender?

- _____
- Prefer not to say

Do you identify as LGBTQ2S+?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

- No schooling completed
- Kindergarten to Grade 8
- Some high school, no diploma
- High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college credit, no degree
- College degree
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree
- Prefer not to say

What is your marital status?

- Single, never married
- Married or domestic partnership
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Prefer not to say

What is your approximate monthly income from all sources?

- Less than \$500
- \$500 – \$999
- \$1000 - \$1499
- \$1500 - \$1999
- \$2000 or more
- Prefer not to say

Does your income vary month to month?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to say

Are you currently receiving any form of social assistance? (Ontario Works, Ontario Disability...)

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Are you a Canadian Citizen?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Do you have any children that live with you some or all of the time?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Which of the following best describes your current housing situation? (Check all that apply)

- Living in my own place
 - Alone
 - With a partner / spouse
- Living in transitional / supportive housing (i.e. Brigid's Place)
- Accessing shelter beds
- Living on the streets / homeless
- Couch surfing
- Other
 - _____
- Prefer not to say

What is the total length of time you have lived on the streets / in shelters?

- _____
- Prefer not to say

In the past 5 years, how many times have you been housed and then homeless again?

- _____
- Prefer not to say

Which of the following best describes why you have lost your housing in the past? (Check all that apply)

- Unable to pay rent
- House takeover / unwanted guests
- Issues related to mental health / addiction
- Incarcerated
- Other
 - _____
- Prefer not to say



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Consent Form: Information About the Study

Project title: *Housing, Safety, and Sex-Work--Ottawa*

Principal Investigator: Dr. Fran Klodawsky, Full Professor, Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, Canada; Ph: +1 613-520-2600 x 8689; e-mail: fran_klodawsky@carleton.ca

Purpose of the Research:

- To explore the housing and safety needs of people engaged in outdoor/survival sex-work in Ottawa
- To examine the existing service gaps for outdoor/survival sex-workers in Ottawa
- To make recommendations to better address programs, services and policies as they relate to housing and safety for outdoor/survival sex-workers in Ottawa
- To prepare reports and academic articles that are based on information provided in the study.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:

- Participate in a focus group together with 4-5 other women-identified outdoor sex trade workers.
- Agree that the discussion can be recorded.
- Decide whether or not you would agree to participate in a one-on-one interview of about 30-45 minutes if asked to do so.
- Answer survey questions about your demographic characteristics.

What Will Happen in the Focus Group?

- The Focus group is a guided discussion led by two members of the research team.
- The discussion will be about the housing and safety needs of people who are involved in outdoor/survival sex in Ottawa.
- Topics will include exploring experiences of feeling safe and unsafe in your housing and your ideas and suggestions about how to increase safety in housing.
- The focus group will take place at _____.
- The focus group discussion will be between 30 and 45 minutes in length.
- Participants will be asked to keep what you hear in the group confidential.
- Focus group participants will be introduced at the beginning of the focus group. When transcription is done, no names will appear in the transcript but a separate name key file will be provided which will allow the researcher to remove all comments made by any participant who asks to withdraw from the study,

What Will Happen in a One-on-One Interview?

- You will be interviewed by a member of the research team on a range of themes, including personal housing history, experience of local current housing, including feelings of housing safety and unsafety, and thoughts about potential program and service gaps.
- The interview will take place at a location that you and the research team member have agreed to.
- The interview will be between 30 and 45 minutes in length.

Who Can Be a Participant in This Study:

- You must be 18 years of age or older, women-identified, and have lived experience of outdoor/survival sex-work.

Agreeing to Participate and Confidentiality:

- Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time.
- Your name or other identifying information will not appear in any report or publication of this research.
- Your Information from the focus group and interview will be safely stored in a locked facility and only research staff will have access to this information.
- Due to the subject matter of the questions asked, there is a moderate risk that you may feel some emotional discomfort when asked about housing challenges that you have encountered or hear those of other participants in the focus group. You can stop the interview at any point, for any reason.
- Participants may refuse to answer specific questions, or request that the audio recorder be turned off at any time during the one-on-one interview.
- You are free to withdraw from the study for up to 30 days after your last focus group or interview encounter. Withdrawal will result in all data associated with your focus group (and/or interview) contributions being destroyed.
- Group discussions will be audiotaped and transcribed.
- Individual interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed unless you indicate that you would prefer to have a second member of the research team present to take written notes of the interview.
- Recordings and surveys will be labeled with pseudonyms (false names) and real names will be removed from any transcripts and replaced by pseudonyms. Recordings, surveys and transcripts will be kept in a secure location and will be available only to the members of the research team. All data associated with this study will be destroyed no later than seven years after the end of the study.

Consent Form for Housing, Safety and Sex Trade – Ottawa

I, _____, acknowledge that the research study described above has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I have been informed of my right to choose to not participate in the study.

As well, the potential risks, harms and discomforts have been explained to me and I also understand the benefits of participating in the research study.

I understand that I have not waived my legal rights nor released the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional duties.

I know that I may ask now or in the future any questions I have about the study or the research procedures.

Appendix V – Peers

This piece was written by one of the peer researchers on this project – Christine – and contains her own opinions and recommendations. Her writing reflects the importance of peers to any research that aims to work with vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Opportunities for Peer Outreach

People experiencing chronic homelessness and those involved in street-level survival strategies, like sex work and panhandling, are predisposed to issues relating to trust. They gravitate to peers where trust is established quickly and information can be exchanged and translated back to service providers, academics, and then back again to the community. Utilizing peers to relate and carry knowledge between service providers and the community (“hard to reach”/marginalized communities), is an important means of increasing access to health and support services among chronically homeless groups.

Peers are also able to convert dry information into useful knowledge for the community because they understand the context in which their peers are best able to use that information. Thus, information provided in its proper context becomes knowledge. Peers would be best utilized in areas such as life-skill building; reintegration into the broader community during housing transitions; and knowledge translation.

Ottawa needs peer-led safety patrols during times when street level sex work is most abundant, including in other areas of the city beside Vanier, like Caldwell (Merivale Road). Ottawa also has a hidden LGBTQ2S+ population of sex workers that are extremely hard to reach and rarely seek formal help. Peer outreach must be inclusive to LGBTQ2S+ sex worker populations.

The Importance of Supportive, Transitional Housing

Chronically homeless street sex workers will be one of the most challenging populations to house, because issues like mental and physical health, addictions, abuse, violence, and involvement with the law are all factors that hinder prolonged, stable housing. Brigid's Place could be the basic model and paying close attention to lessons learned there will greatly increase a safe, inclusive housing program. The trans community in Ottawa is especially hidden, but needs attention as well.

Supportive, transitional housing should provide individual rooms with a communal kitchen, living room, and bathrooms; food, phone, internet, and cable included in room and board; supportive staff onsite; and onsite access to physical and mental health care.

Having consistent staff and peer support will quickly build trust. Agreements between the house and residents should be straight forward, contain sensible rules, and weekly opportunities to meet and discuss issues. House rules must be clear and understandable. Supportive living programs should be designed in a way that allows individualized housing plans, meaning the flexibility of time and support based on individual needs, and keeping our ideas of optimal lifestyle, not theirs. Supportive housing should allow a safe place where basic human needs can be met, where time is not a factor.

Obtaining or re-obtaining self-reliance in a non-judgmental, supportive, encouraging but not encroaching environment, allows someone who has been living in constant fight-or-flight mode a chance to regain stability. Ongoing connections or reconnections with family and children should be explored. At some point transitioning to self-reliance through housing (in community) and self-efficacy may be a goal, but there should be no mandatory time limits on transitional housing stays. That said, each case will be different. Not everyone will succeed with abstinence as an end goal to addiction or stop sex work. Reducing violence and abuse and using a least harm approach for all should be an attainable goal. Service providers should set up community outreach supports, especially during transition into being housed in the community.

The supportive housing experience will be different for each person. Success should be measured by assessing if the person is healthier and safer, if they have increased access to harm reduction practices, and to peer and allied support (compared to before moving into supportive housing).

The Importance of Peers to Supportive Housing Models

Peer outreach would be a definite asset for people adjusting to self-sufficiency when it becomes time to reintegrate into community living. For example, peers could accompany others on the first of the month to pay bills (phone, bus pass), and to get groceries.

Finding affordable, safe, inclusive housing away from Ottawa Community Housing complexes is preferable for some people. Once stable, residents should learn or re-learn living skills and be encouraged to seek short, informal bursts of employment, furthering themselves from street life. This type of work provides more manageable levels of responsibility than full-time, structured employment and could include gardening, 1 to 2-hour flyer delivery, or paid house chores.

Peers can work in a variety of roles throughout the community. Research positions have allowed us to learn how community-based research works from designing studies, learning the basics of formal ethics processes, interviewing participants, interpreting results, and bringing those results back to the community. Intensive training should be provided if peers are to undertake research responsibilities and ongoing mentoring should be provided.

Peer workers help fellow peers, service providers, and academics all understand each other through cultural interpretation skills and knowledge exchange processes. Peers are valued members of teams working to reach marginalized and hard to reach communities. They should continue to be rewarded through paid or honorarium positions. Lived experience is invaluable and recognized throughout the world.