

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN HOMELESS FAMILIES: SHELTER SPACES AND SERVICES

Introduction

Children and Youth in Homeless Families: Shelter Spaces and Services is a research study commissioned by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation in 1999-2000 to provide a glimpse into the experiences of the children and youth of homeless families residing in emergency shelters.

The objectives of the study were:

1. to summarize the current literature on the space and service needs of homeless families;
2. to provide an overview of shelter spaces and services available to children and youth and their parents or guardians; and
3. to evaluate the suitability of these spaces and services by comparing the needs of homeless families with the facilities and services currently available.

It was not the intent of the study to attempt an inventory or a census of shelters serving families with children and youth.

Research Program

Methodology

The research methodology included a review of existing data and literature from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Statistics Canada, universities and previous studies on Canadian women's shelters. There were also two surveys done of Canadian shelters.

The first one, a screening survey, identified shelters, including family violence shelters, across the country that provided housing to homeless families and were interested in participating in the study. The second survey was then administered to these 112 shelters. They included 33 general emergency shelters, 64 family violence shelters and 15 municipal programs that provide temporary shelters to homeless families, usually in motels or similar temporary accommodation.

The survey respondents were primarily from large urban areas in most regions of Canada. Consequently, the findings may not be statistically representative of geographic regions or the types of shelters surveyed, nor can it be assumed that the results accurately depict the shelter situation that exists throughout Canada. The bias in the sample also precludes drawing any regional or provincial conclusions as well as using the results for statistical estimations. In addition, several questions did not apply to the municipal shelter programs, such as those referring to on-site services.

Findings

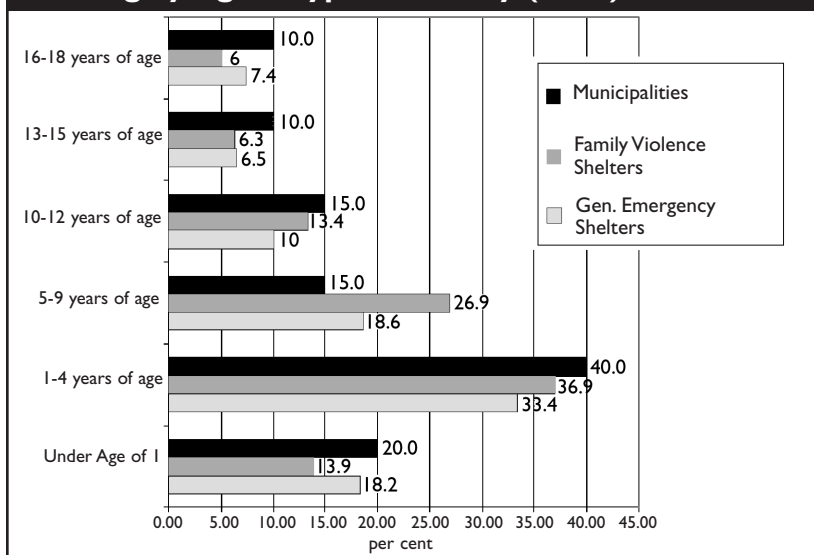
While the findings may not be statistically representative of geographical regions or type of shelter, they do highlight some interesting facts about the children and youth who use these facilities and their services.



A profile of children and youth in homeless families

The homeless shelters surveyed met the needs of a wide range of children and youth. Over half of the children were under the age of 5, almost 30 per cent were between the ages of 5 and 12, and less than 15 per cent were teenagers.

Figure 1: Children/Youth in Shelters/Emergency Housing by Age & Type of Facility (Q.22)



Note: Number of valid cases for Q.22(a) to (g) ranged from: 10 to 16/33 for general emergency shelters; 19 to 32/64 for family violence shelters; and 1 to 8/15 for municipalities.

The most prevalent difficulties among these children were problems with self-esteem and sense of well-being. Other difficulties included behaviour, school achievement and social skills.

Sources of income in homeless families

Generally, the children and youth who stay in these shelters were not from working families. Only about 10 per cent of the families who used the shelters had earned income. The rest depended on income support programs, child support payments or had no income. For the general emergency shelters, over 70 per cent of the families relied on social assistance, compared to over 50 per cent in the family violence shelters.

Figure 2: Source of income upon arrival at the shelter/emergency housing (Q.28)

	General Emergency Shelters (%)	Family Violence Shelters (%)
Paid employment	8.2	10.4
Employment Insurance	6.7	3.8
Social assistance	71.7	52.7
Child support	20.9	5.7
Other	5.3	8.9
No source of income	13.1	36.3

Note: Number of valid cases for Q.28(a) to (f) ranged from: 11 to 23/33 for general emergency shelters; 27 to 44/64 for family violence shelters; and 2 to 5/15 for municipalities.

Shelter spaces and services

One of the common problems reported by all types of shelters is overcrowding. About one third of the survey respondents indicated that families sometimes shared bedrooms or sleeping facilities, and that children or youth even shared bedrooms with children or youth from other families.

Typically, shelters were located close to schools, stores, medical and legal services, hospitals, public transit and parks. Most had adequate cooking facilities, plumbing and heating, and enough books, toys and games, and baby equipment. While half or more of the shelters served school-age children and youth, less than half had adequate study areas.

In addition, 55 per cent of the general emergency shelters and 90 per cent of family violence shelters had indoor recreation areas. Outdoor recreation spaces were available at 64 per cent and 88 per cent of the facilities, respectively. Nearly two thirds of the family violence shelters but less than one third of the general emergency shelters offered child care services. Counselling for children and youth was available at 33 per cent of the general emergency shelters, 80 per cent of the family violence centres and 22 per cent of the municipalities surveyed.

The availability of services for parents such as job training, employment searches and on-site medical or legal services was another area explored by the survey. The availability of such services was low in the general emergency shelters but higher in the family violence shelters and municipal programs. Housing referrals and referrals to other services were commonly available at all the shelters.

Developing strong links and partnerships with the community and other agencies was seen by many respondents as an important way to help homeless families access services such as housing and counselling.

The shelters were usually staffed by paid employees and had at least one person who was readily in touch with clients and aware of their activities and needs. Family violence shelters were more likely to have at least one child support worker.

About one half of the family violence shelters and about one fifth of the general emergency shelters and municipal programs conducted needs assessments for the children and youth admitted. The assessment activities included general evaluations of the children and youth, discussions of their needs and anger management.

Eligibility criteria and rules and regulations were applied at about half of the shelters. However, one widely reported rule was that male youth over the age of admittance were not accepted at the shelters and were requested to stay with friends or family, or go to a men's shelter.

When families leave the shelter

The survey also asked where do homeless families go when they leave the shelters? Close to two thirds of the respondents indicated that, on average, 75 to 100 per cent of the families moved to their own apartment or house. Ten per cent or less moved to another shelter, a rooming house or motel, or they stayed with friends or moved to another city. A very small percentage lived on the streets.

Meeting the needs of homeless families with children and youth

According to the survey, the primary needs of homeless families when leaving the shelter were financial assistance and affordable housing. More than half of homeless families needed some level of special support services to maintain a stable household for their children and youth. In addition to financial assistance and affordable housing, these needs included counselling in life skills, childcare, and training and employment skills. Two thirds of the general emergency shelters reported that 25 per cent or less of the homeless families who leave the shelters return within a year.

Strategies that helped to meet these needs included outreach programs, home visits and follow-ups, and supportive counselling. A number of other approaches including non-judgmental staff and staff who encourage a self-help attitude within the shelter, were also reported to have been successful. Other valuable services included respectful, practical problem-solving assistance, helping clients set up on their own with weekly support from a coordinator, and providing referral services.

Some shelters provided successful follow-up support services to families who had left the shelter. Among the services provided were phone follow-ups, home visits, counselling and help with budgeting. Some outreach counsellors combined home visits, telephone support and advocacy for a period of 3-6 months after the families had left the shelter.

Close to two thirds of the general emergency shelters and family violence shelters and about one half of the municipal programs reported that their greatest difficulties in providing services were the result of limited budgets and resources, space and staff. About half of the shelters indicated they had difficulty accommodating persons with disabilities at their facilities.

Conclusion

Children and Youth in Homeless Families: Shelter Spaces and Services cautions that its findings may not be statistically representative of geographic regions or the type of shelter surveyed. However, it does provide many interesting observations on the experiences of homeless children and youth who stay in shelters, and the many gaps in services that make service delivery a challenge.

Recommendations for further research

The report concludes with the recommendation that more research be conducted in the following three areas to provide additional information:

1. A comprehensive inventory of the number, size and location of all types of shelters serving homeless families with children and youth, and the types of services they provide.¹ It is currently impossible to assess the basic adequacy of shelter services for children and youth across Canada.
2. Information on the health status of children and youth staying in emergency shelters for homeless families.
3. Research into the long-term effects of homelessness on children and youth in shelters.

Such additional information would provide a more complete picture not only of how local communities meet the needs of children and youth and their homeless families, but also of the health and emotional effects that living in an emergency shelter can have on this young clientele.

¹ Note that the biannual "Transition Home Survey" (Statistics Canada), only covers family violence shelters.

Project Managers: Gloria Neufeld-Redekop,
Jim Zamprelli

Housing Research at CMHC

Under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

This fact sheet is one of a series intended to inform you of the nature and scope of CMHC's research.

To find more *Research Highlights* plus a wide variety of information products, visit our Website at

www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca

or contact:

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
700 Montreal Road
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0P7

Phone: 1 800 668-2642

Fax: 1 800 245-9274

OUR WEB SITE ADDRESS: www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca

Although this information product reflects housing experts' current knowledge, it is provided for general information purposes only. Any reliance or action taken based on the information, materials and techniques described are the responsibility of the user. Readers are advised to consult appropriate professional resources to determine what is safe and suitable in their particular case. CMHC assumes no responsibility for any consequence arising from use of the information, materials and techniques described.