

# Guide for Professional Researchers Considering Community-Based Participatory Research on Women's Homelessness

## What is community-based, participatory research and how can it be useful?

Many excluded and marginalized groups—including Aboriginal peoples (First Nations, Inuit, Métis), people who are homeless, low-income people, drug users, people in prison, sex workers, and women survivors of violence—have had research “done on” us for a long time. Researchers from the government or universities come into our communities and take away information that they use to write reports or make policies about us, based on their own interpretation of what they have seen and heard. Often the reports and policies that have come out of this type of research treat us as “the problem,” and the “solutions” they propose are not appropriate or helpful.

Community-based participatory research (also known as CBPR) is an approach that challenges this way of doing research.

- CBPR begins in communities.
- It is grounded in lived experience and informed by people's questions and needs.
- Community members\* are directly involved in CBPR and have control of the process of the research.
- People with lived experience are active and equal members of CBPR research teams.
- In CBPR teams, all forms of expertise are honoured, all voices are heard, and all skills are recognized.
- CBPR is based in relationships of reciprocity, trust, respect and collaboration. Building these relationships takes time.
- Participation in CBPR empowers people, enhances self-confidence and self-esteem, and breaks social isolation.
- CBPR teaches professional researchers how to work respectfully with communities.
- CBPR uses non-invasive methods for gathering information or “data.” It uses open questions, clear language, and methods organic to the community, not based in scientific observation.
- Action is central to CBPR, and projects incorporate action plans from the beginning.
- The community retains ownership of its information and ideas, and shares control of CBPR projects, which it is free to use in the service of action for change.

This guide was produced by the Women, Homelessness, and Community-Based Participatory Research project. It is based on the experiences and recommendations of a group of women experiencing poverty and homelessness, who have been involved with community-based participatory research. Other guides, and the full project report, can be found at [www.homelesshub.ca/Library/View.aspx?id=55138](http://www.homelesshub.ca/Library/View.aspx?id=55138). This project was funded by Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and Homelessness Partnering Strategy of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.



Canadian Homelessness  
Research Network



Cities Centre  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



FORWARD For Women's Autonomy Rights & Dignity

\* In this guide we use the terms “community members,” “grassroots,” “with lived experience,” “first voice,” and “facing homelessness” interchangeably to describe individuals and communities involved in CBPR.

A fundamental aspect of CBPR is that it is not done only to advance knowledge. Instead, the process and products of CBPR projects should directly benefit grassroots individuals and communities. The products or results of CBPR projects can answer questions, support advocacy, and initiate actions to address community problems. But the process of CBPR should also hold intrinsic benefits for community members. For example, working together on a research project can bring a group or community together, help people develop new skills, and may even provide access to research funding for wages and activities. CBPR projects should be planned with these individual and community benefits in mind.

## Considering CBPR projects on women's homelessness

Women clearly state that CBPR must include first voice people in all project planning and decisions. Just involving community members in data gathering does not meet this standard. Here are some questions professional researchers can ask when considering CBPR on women's homelessness:

- There is lots of research on homelessness - why do another study? What are the alternatives to research?
- What does research already show about this issue, and how can this information be made more accessible to grassroots individuals and communities?
- Do I have the networks and connections I need to form equitable working relationships with women facing homelessness and grassroots organizations, right from the planning stages of this project?
- What is my stake in this issue? How does my own lived experience inform my perspective?
- What am I in this project for, what am I gaining, and how can gains from this project be equitably shared?
- What skills do I need in order to carry out a CBPR project (such as advocacy, community development, group facilitation) and do I have these skills?
- To what institutions am I accountable in this project (the University, the funder, my employer), and how do the requirements / restrictions of these institutions affect the project? What are strategies for ensuring an equitable project in the context of these restrictions?
- In what ways can the process of research directly benefit participants, co-researchers (or "peer" researchers), and their communities?
- What support can I offer the community during and after the project, so that the research can be used for action and change?

## Where to learn more:

- The Ontario Women's Health Network worked with women facing homelessness to develop a research method called "Inclusion Research." You can download their Inclusion Research Handbook and Guide to Focus Groups here: [www.owhn.on.ca/inclusionhandbook.htm](http://www.owhn.on.ca/inclusionhandbook.htm) or call them at 1-877-860-4545 to get a copy.
- Your Rights in Research: A Guide for Women provides information for women who are street-involved and who are considering participating in research. You can call BC Centre of Excellence in Women's Health at 1-888-300-3088 ext. 2633 or download it at [www.bccewh.bc.ca/publications-resources/documents/YourRightsinResearchAGuideforWomen.pdf](http://www.bccewh.bc.ca/publications-resources/documents/YourRightsinResearchAGuideforWomen.pdf)