

ON ONE DAY, 234 SHELTERING ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS CANADA  
RECORDED HOW MANY WOMEN AND CHILDREN THEY HELPED.

# SHELTER VOICES



## Violence against women: A national threat requires a national response

**S**helter Voices 2016 is the third national survey of transition houses and shelters<sup>[1]</sup> serving women and their children who have been affected by domestic and intimate partner abuse, conducted by the Canadian Network of Women's Shelters and Transition Houses. The one-day snapshot<sup>[2]</sup> represented 234 shelters<sup>[3]</sup> from every province and territory in Canada. Shelter Voices provides insight on the experience, analysis and hopes of organizations, workers and program users.

On a single day, 234 transition houses and shelters were housing 1760 women and 1915 children and helped 2663 women and 1633 children through programming, groups and services.

**“** *I finally felt like a human being, which I haven't in a long time.*  
- Shelter user and abuse survivor

**“** *We have been operating at 140-155% for the past 7 months. Our staff are tired.*  
- Shelter worker

## 38% of shelters were full on snapshot day

416 women and children reached out for shelter at 234 transition houses and shelters on a single day. Of that 416, 111 were able to become new residents, while 305 women and children had to be turned away due to lack of capacity. This means that 73% of potential new residents could not be accommodated that day. 38% of responding shelters and transition houses had no available beds on the day of the snapshot. These numbers, combined with staff testimony, suggest that a significant proportion of shelters are chronically over capacity.



Canadian Network of Women's  
Shelters & Transition Houses

Réseau canadien des maisons  
d'hébergement pour femmes

April 2016

## 73% of women requesting shelter must seek alternatives

When there are no beds available for women fleeing from abusers, shelter staff offer safety counselling, referrals and support and do their utmost to find alternative sheltering arrangements on a case-by-case basis. This is a stressful and challenging situation for shelter staff and a nightmare for women and children seeking safe shelter while fleeing abuse.

Shelter Responses to Women Seeking Safe Accommodation When All Beds Are Full	% of Respondents
Found space for them in another VAW shelter	49%
Responded that we could not accommodate them	41%
Found space for them in another shelter (not VAW specific)	35%
Referred them to a help line	31%
Made ad-hoc accommodations within our shelter (ie cots, sofa-beds)	13%
Found a hotel room for them	8%
Other (safety plan, wait list, other accommodations)	8%

### Life and death on a shoestring

Statistics Canada's 2014 Homicide in Canada report shows that a woman is killed by her current or former intimate partner an average of every 6 days in Canada. Death threats are far more common. Women seeking shelter from abuse are often doing so out of a very real sense of terror for the lives and safety of their children and themselves. 110 of the women that shelters helped on the snapshot day had been threatened with a gun. Pregnancy also increases the likelihood of extreme physical violence and intimate partner homicide. Shelters were aware that 148 women helped on the snapshot day were pregnant.

“ I remember riding that bus with my little boy with nowhere to go and no one to turn to. Thank you for being there for me. I will never forget this. - Shelter user and abuse survivor

### Violence crosses borders

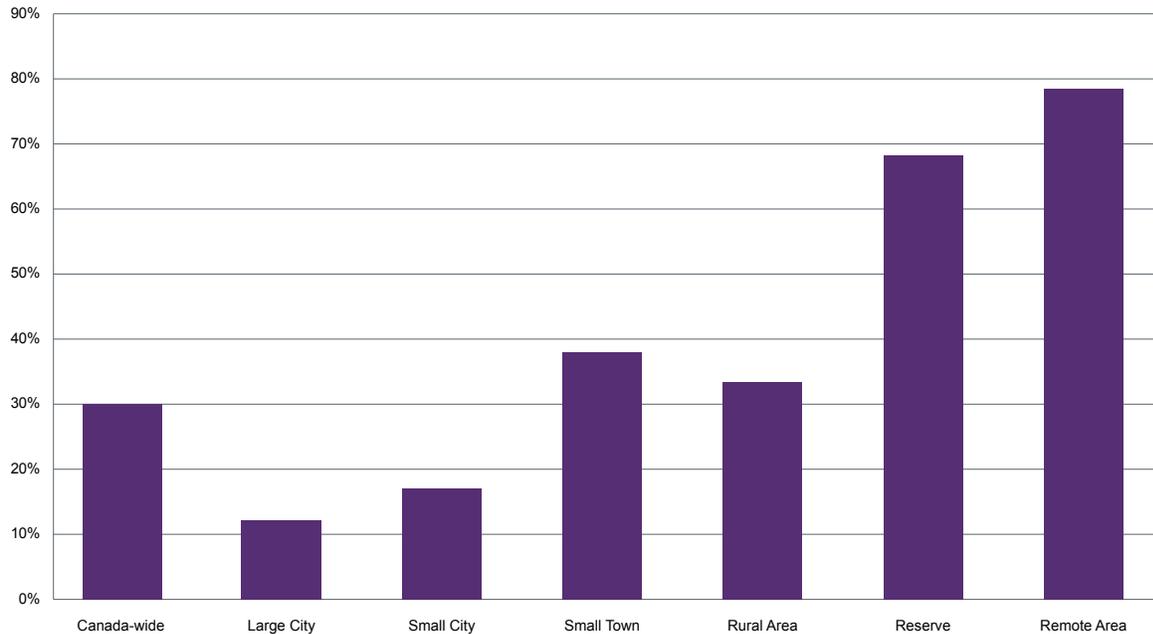
97% of the shelters responded that they accept women from other provinces and territories, and 44% have received women from other provinces or territories in the past month alone. That number goes up to 70% in the past six months and 84% in the past year. Clearly, fleeing abuse is a challenge that crosses borders. While very important work happens at the provincial and territorial level, the issues of violence against women must also be addressed at the national level.

“ My boyfriend held a gun to my head while I was holding our baby. He poked me with it and left bruises. - Shelter user and abuse survivor

## Choosing between abuse and inadequate housing

Another common challenge highlighted in the survey is the need for more special support for women – especially marginalized women – leaving shelters and trying to start lives apart from their abusers. Affordable housing options, such as subsidized and social housing or second-stage housing for women leaving abuse, can be difficult to find. 30% of shelters reported that they have no social housing program in their region. This lack is less pronounced in major cities and more pronounced in rural areas, reserves and remote areas.

### Reported absence of social housing programs



Of the shelters Canada-wide who do have access to housing programs, 96% reported a waiting period of over one month, 68% reported a waiting period of over three months, and 36% reported a waiting period of over six months.

“

*A woman has talked about returning to her abuser because no landlord seems to be willing to rent to her because she is on social assistance and has several children. – Shelter worker*

Nearly 76% of the shelters responding to the survey have relied on food donations to meet the needs of women during resident in shelter or to assist them when leaving the shelter.

“

*They know they are helping women to stay safe but at the same time they recognize that when a woman decides to leave an abuser she may be choosing a life of poverty, inadequate housing etc. So it's hard to support women to leave while knowing what risks her future may hold. – Shelter worker*

## Increasing need, stagnant funding

73% of shelters identified the increasingly complexity of women's needs as one of their top three challenges – the most identified challenge by a large margin. Shelters tell us that women's shelters and transition houses have increasingly become the front lines for addressing trauma-induced mental health concerns and coping mechanisms such as substance abuse. This adds to the challenge of supporting women and children in transition.

40% of respondents identified diminishing/stagnant government funding as one of their top three challenges in the past year. 56% of responding shelters and transition houses must renew their funding contracts on a year to year basis.

“It feels like we are having to do more with less resources. We are faced with increasingly challenging situations (mental health, addictions, immigration) and need more community resources to support the women. We love our jobs, it isn't always easy but it is meaningful work. – Shelter worker

## Facing the future

“The women we serve are taking back control over their own lives. They become more aware of their own needs, and better equipped to respond. Overall, women gain the desire to achieve an independent life and keep their children from experiencing further violence. – Shelter worker

The social, structural and personal barriers to ending cycles of abuse are very challenging, but shelter and transition house workers believe that a better future is possible. Violence against women is not inevitable.

“I'd like to thank you for taking me in when my life crashed at my deepest painful bottom. Last year, I got in my car and drove away and I have not looked back. Now I go regularly to a drop-in and a support group. I'm learning. I'm FREE. Free from all the abuse that carried and followed me ALL MY LIFE.” – Shelter user and abuse survivor.

Shelter Voices is produced by the Canadian Network of Women's Shelters and Transition Houses, a coalition of 13 provincial and territorial shelter networks representing over 400 shelters across Canada. The network works as a unified voice to collaborate, educate, and innovate for systemic change that ends violence against women, making Canada a model for safety in the world.

The CNWSTH thanks Oxfam Canada and the National Union of Public and General Employees for their contribution to Shelter Voices. Printing provided by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers.

Visit our website [www.endvaw.ca](http://www.endvaw.ca) and find us at [facebook.com/endvawnetwork](https://facebook.com/endvawnetwork).



If you are a woman experiencing abuse, there is someone you can reach out to any time of day or night.

i "Women's shelters" and "transition houses" are regional synonyms and are used interchangeably in this report.

ii Respondents picked a day between mid-February and early March 2016.

iii This response rate represents about half of the women's shelters and transition houses in Canada.

iv Total is over 100% as shelters were invited to pick multiple relevant responses.

v 83 confirmed intimate partner homicides in 2014 \* 0.8 (80% of victims were women) = 66.365 days divided by 66 women intimate partner homicide victims = 5.56 rounded up to 6 days

vi Justice Canada, Report on sentencing for manslaughter in cases involving intimate relationships, 2001