Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support

Report on a Community-Based Research Project Using Staged Photography

University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work, Regent Park Community Health Centre & Sistering - A Woman's Place.

The original print version of this report was released in February 2007.

This updated, Internet version was released in Fall, 2007.

Electronic copies of posters (shown on pp. 22-25 in this report) are also found on the website above.

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"What do I want? To be able to live free, not be harmed, to be around love and respect and understanding and lots of happiness with some sense of security so that if I ever get stuck or anything like that I know I can talk to somebody or go somewhere I can hang out if I want to sit or sleep or whatever. That's what we need. A safe place."

- Woman who has experienced homelessness

Coming Together Research Team:
Principle Investigator: Professor Izumi Sakamoto
Co-investigator: Josie Ricciardi (Regent Park Community Health Centre)
Research Coordinator: Jen Plyler
Community Artist: Natalie Wood
Researchers: Rose Cameron, Lily Grewal and Billie Allan
Students: Aisha Chapra, Bixidu Lobo-Molnar and Matthew Chin
Community Partner: Angela Robertson (Sistering– A Woman's Place)

Advisory Board Members:
Katherine
Marie
Lida
Brandi Nashkewa
Leahanne Swan
Sheila A. Samuels
Tiesha Anderson

"Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support" is an arts-based community research project exploring how women and transwomen who are marginally housed build support networks with each other in order to survive. The research team collected interview data, and identified key themes that were then explored in the art making process with other women/transwomen at drop-in centres across the city. Through painting, drama and photography women/transwomen depicted their visions and stories of inclusion, friendship and safe spaces.

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I. What is "Coming Together"?

"*Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support*" is a community-based research project using arts (staged photography) to explore how women and transwomen who are homeless and marginally housed build support networks with each other in order to survive. It is a joint project by the University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work, Regent Park Community Health Centre, and Sistering - A Woman's Place.

The project set out to learn the following:
1. How do women/transwomen form and use friend (social support) networks?
2. What is the impact of differences among women/transwomen (e.g., Aboriginal heritage, gender identity) on their membership in informal support networks?
3. How can social services assist women in enhancing these networks?
4. What do homeless women envision safe and appropriate housing to look like?

The initial research activities involved compiling an extensive literature review and conducting a series of in-depth interviews with women/transwomen who were homeless and marginally housed and their service providers. Once the initial analysis of the interviews was complete, an advisory board of women/transwomen who experienced homelessness was formed to guide further data analysis and determine next steps according to a grounded theory approach. In consultation with a community artist, the advisory board chose the art medium of "staged photography" to generate and express the research outcomes. The advisory board and research team travelled to four drop-in centres to engage groups of women/transwomen in the art-making process. Through painting, costumes, theatre and photography, groups of women/transwomen experiencing homelessness or marginal housing created scenes depicting their own visions of inclusion, friendship and safe space. The artwork and photographs resulting from these sessions have subsequently been presented in various ways including posters and public exhibitions.

This research report highlights the findings and key themes of the interviews and art-making process, including:
- characteristics and functions of social networks for women/transwomen who have experienced homelessness;
- violence and trauma in the lives of women/transwomen;
- importance of safe space, homes and housing; and
- changes needed in social services, agencies and policies (e.g., the need for more Aboriginal-led and trans-inclusive services, as well as the creation of accessible counselling services).

Finally, the impact of the research on participants and advisory board members is explored. Further discussion regarding the details of this research project (e.g., "getting the word out", evaluation, next steps) are included in the appendices.

"We tell each other where we can get something. Our crowd is pretty tight out here with each other."

- Woman who has experienced homelessness

Why is This Research Important?

Poverty and homelessness are consequences of inequality and oppression that disproportionately impact women. As liberalization and privatization create greater divides between rich and poor, both between and within countries, poor women are increasingly marginalized and displaced (Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2006). In Toronto, women across the city are living in poverty, facing a daily struggle to meet their physical, emotional, financial, spiritual and social needs. A large portion of these women are women of colour, immigrant and Aboriginal women. It is estimated that 771,535 people are experiencing poverty in Toronto (Statistics Canada, 2005). 150,000 households in the city spend more than 50% of their income on rent, and due to the risk of losing their housing, they are considered 'marginally housed' (City of Toronto, 2006). There are currently 70,000 households on the waitlist for subsidized housing (City of Toronto, 2006).

According to the City of Toronto guidelines, homelessness is defined as "a condition of people who live outside, stay in emergency shelters, spend most of their income on rent, or live in overcrowded, substandard conditions and are therefore at serious risk of becoming homeless." (City of Toronto, 2003, p. 58). It is very difficult to understand the full magnitude of homelessness in our city since many marginally housed people, including those staying on couches, with friends or family, or in unsafe, unsustainable and/or crowded rental units are not included in headcounts (Hulchanski, 2000). What we do know is that 30,000 people stay in Toronto shelters annually, and that more than 5,000 individuals find themselves in a shelter on any given night (Wellesley Institute, 2006). Disproportionate numbers of single women and women with children utilize shelters, with approximately 1,313 women stay in shelters nightly (City of Toronto, 2006). Transwomen are particularly overrepresented in the homeless population because of exclusion on all fronts - home, work and school (Mottet & Ohle, 2003). Homeless women are ten times more likely to die than women who are housed (Cheung & Hwang, 2004). Discrimination and exclusion based on race, sexual orientation, gender identity, class, ability and language all influence a woman's chance of experiencing homelessness.

Violence and homelessness go hand-in-hand. Cycles of abuse from childhood through adulthood are mirrored in cycles of unstable housing and homelessness

for women. Social isolation and lack of services help to keep these cycles in place (Sistering, 2002). Many women have lived their entire lives without a 'home' that is safe. Even for women living in supportive housing, 50% will return to the shelter system or the streets because they often feel unsafe in co-ed environments (Novac, Brown, Guyton & Quance, 1996).   For many, social services are used as a survival tactic to escape abusive relationships and unsafe housing conditions (Novac, et al, 1996; Novac, Serge, Eberle & Brown, 2002; Tomas & Dittmar, 1995).   Often, these women arrive at social services in Toronto after being forced to flee their homes or communities in small towns, rural settings and/or reserves to escape violent men.   We must change the way we think about homelessness in order to better understand what it truly is for so many women: the unjust result of taking a courageous step to reject violence and abuse at home (Tomas & Dittmar, 1995).

Survival strategies on the street seem to differ between women and men on the street. Women tend to become invisible in order to survive the male-dominated space of the streets, while men can seek protection in numbers and claim 'ownership' of public spaces. Women have, at best, an ambivalent relationship to the street and are never able to be as comfortable as men (Wardhaugh, 2000, cited in Novac et al, 2002), since they are more likely to experience violence on the streets.

The best known and most studied examples of organized responses to homelessness are provided by formal social services and faith-based services. These include homeless shelters, food programs, and case management services. Far less known and studied are the efforts made by those who experience homelessness themselves to organize collectively for their needs (Mandiberg & Sakamoto, 2003). One consistent example of such self-organized or grassroots efforts is the encampments/squats of people who are homeless that have appeared constantly throughout history in
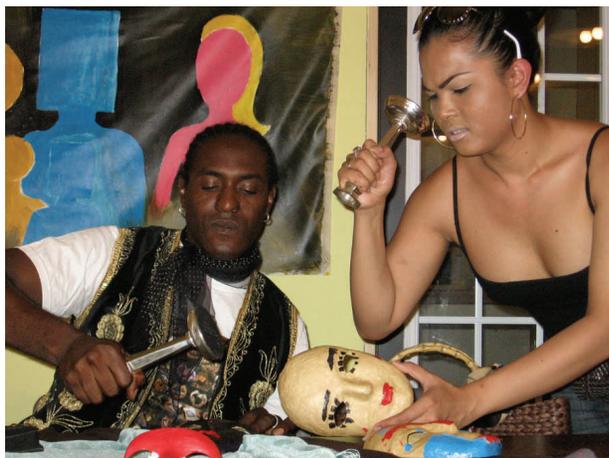
North America (Mandiberg & Sakamoto, 2003). "Hobo" villages and Great Depression squatter's villages are well known examples from the past (Mandiberg & Sakamoto, 2003). More recently homeless encampments have been created in different communities across North America since the 1980s, with prominent examples in Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, and Portland (Mandiberg & Sakamoto, 2003). Tent City, until its eviction, was the most well-known example here in Toronto.   However, even within homeless-led initiatives such as Tent City, it is not clear what roles women have been able to play. As in our broader society, squats and housing takeovers tend to be led by men, while women, particularly women of colour and Aboriginal women, tend to be excluded from leadership (Smith, 2000).   In order to participate and benefit equally, organizing efforts need to be better grounded in homeless women's networks and resourcefulness.

Much research has been done to help us better understand why women are homeless and how we can address the issue at the municipal, provincial and federal levels. We know that women's lives could be improved by more affordable housing, livable social assistance rates, higher minimum wage, universal daycare and more inclusive and accountable social and health services (Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse et al., 2006; Sistering, 2002; Wellesley Institute, 2006). Despite this knowledge, political, economic and social decision-makers have not put forth the effort needed to end the injustice of homelessness in our city. In fact, homelessness continues to grow rapidly (Wellesley Institute, 2006).

With public policy and social programs failing, women experiencing homelessness have increasingly been forced to depend on themselves and each other for survival. Although there has been a great deal of research and writing on homelessness in Toronto since the 1980s, there has been little attention paid to the strengths and resiliency of homeless people and their ability to support themselves and each other, create a community, or forge a social movement. This gap is largely caused by charity-based perspectives of homelessness that view women as victims and well-meaning social services as the only solution (Chan, 2004). This project, "Coming Together" aims to address this gap by placing women's strengths and resourcefulness at the centre of solutions to homelessness. Examining how women come together to share knowledge and support each other in the face of homelessness, and how their efforts and challenges are affected by their multiple identities and marginalizations, needs to be recognized, better understood, celebrated and defended.

What is Community-Based Research (CBR)?

CBR is a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBR begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change to improve community health and eliminate health disparities. (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2004)

Community-based research arose from an acknowledgement that traditional social research based in academic institutions does not typically directly benefit the marginalized communities who often constitute "the researched". Instead, academic researchers in community-based research work in partnership with community agencies and community members, making the research more relevant and equitable to the community with which they work. Mutual trust, respect and commitment are some of the features that characterize the relationship between the research partners (Community-Campus Partnership for Health, 2007).

For our research team, it was important that the project reflected the opinions and perspectives of women/transwomen who were homeless or marginally housed, since our realities as researchers and service providers were very different from those who experience the issue of homelessness first-hand. In Phase I, a lack of funding prevented us from working closely with homeless and marginally housed women, but in Phase II, funding from the Wellesley Institute made it possible for us to ethically work in collaboration with women/transwomen who have experienced homelessness, thereby increasing the relevance of the research and enriching the overall research efforts.
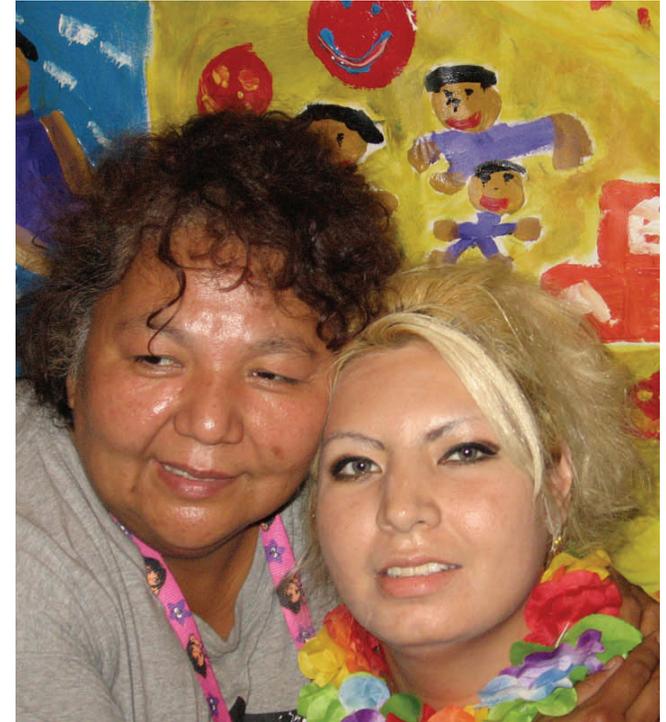
The Research Team

The research team is grounded in community-based research principles (Israel et al., 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2004) and builds on over two years of working relationship between the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto, Regent Park Community Health Centre, and Sistering - A Women's Place. The research team includes:

- Principle investigator, Izumi Sakamoto, a university based academic researcher;
- Co-investigator, Josie Ricciardi, a social worker with much experience working with homeless women;
- Project coordinator, Jen Plyler, a social worker with an anti-poverty activist background;
- Visual artist and community worker, Natalie Wood, who has experience in community arts with homeless women;
- Drop-in centre administrator, Angela Robertson, who has experience in advocacy and research work with homeless women;
- Several undergraduate, master's and doctoral students who conducted literature review and helped with data collection and analysis: Lily Grewal, Rose Cameron (Mandamin), Aisha Chapra, Matthew Chin and Bixi Lobo-Molnar.
- Seven women/transwomen who had personal experience with homelessness joined the research team. They included, Katherine, Marie, Lida, Brandi Nashkewa, Leehanne Swan, Sheila A. Samuels, and Teisha Anderson.

In addition to following the community-based research guidelines, the research team operates from an anti-oppressive and empowerment perspective (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1999; Ristock & Pennel, 1996; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005) and sees women who are homeless/marginally housed as individuals who fight multiple forms of oppression with resourcefulness and strengths.


"Women make huge transitions from streets to housing and the manner in which the system currently works doesn't honor the importance that networks have in women's lives, and is perhaps one of the reasons that housing is difficult for women to sustain."

-Staff at a woman's hostel
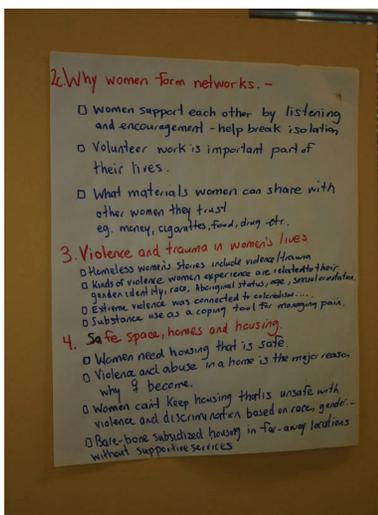
The research was conducted in two phases. Phase I involved "fact finding" (qualitative research) and included:

- an extensive literature review of over 100 journal articles and research reports;
- 13 interviews with service providers and researchers (key informant interviews);
- 20 in-depth interviews with women/transwomen who are homeless or marginally housed (demographic information in Appendix C, pp. 35-36).

Based on our findings from Phase I, we designed Phase II to be more participatory, action-oriented and arts-based. This was done with the help of the advisory board members who had themselves experienced homelessness. An art form of "staged photography" was used for this phase, allowing over 50 women/transwomen to participate in four art-making sessions across Toronto. The resulting images were then reviewed with the advisory board and made into four posters highlighting key messages that came out of this process (see pp. 22-25). More information on research methods can be found in Appendix A (pp. 31-32).

Phase I: Interviews with Homeless Women/Transwomen and Service Providers

Interviews with Service Providers and Researchers (Key Informant Interviews)

How did we select participants?
Initially, the research team generated a list of more than 40 service providers and service agencies including drop-in centres, shelters/hostels and health centres with rich experiences working with women/transwomen who were marginally housed or homeless. From this list, we began interviewing a few service providers, who, in turn, recommended other service providers. Additional key informants were recruited to address the knowledge gaps identified by the research team. With the exception of one full-time researcher, the interview participants were all service providers.

Who were these service providers?
Of the twelve service providers interviewed, five worked primarily with Aboriginal women/peoples, one service provider worked specifically with transwomen/trans people, and the rest worked with a wide range of women/transwomen experiencing homelessness and marginal housing. Their occupations included outreach workers, social workers, nurses, counselors, program coordinators, and administrators, and working at drop-in centres for women, women-centred programs, hostels/shelters, mental health services, and community health centres, including Aboriginal-specific services.

Interviews with Women/Transwomen Who Have Experienced Homelessness

How did we recruit participants?

Overall, 20 women/transwomen (transsexual or transgendered women) participated in face-to-face interviews. The service providers we interviewed earlier helped us identify and approach women/transwomen who had reputations of helping other women/transwomen, or were generally connected to other women/transwomen. We also tried to recruit a diverse group of women by specifically recruiting at locations such as drop-in centres and shelters that are focused on or had higher proportions of Aboriginal women, transwomen or immigrant women who are non-native speakers of English. Service providers also helped us to connect with women/transwomen in their existing programs and to secure rooms to conduct interviews so that they could be done on site. In some cases, women brought other women to participate in the study. All women who completed the interviews received $25 as an honorarium for their time and efforts and two transit tokens. These sampling methods are called venue-based, information-rich and/or snowball sampling methods.

Who were the interview participants?

Of the 20 participants, six were transwomen and 14 were biological women. At the time of their interviews, five women/transwomen were living on the street, seven were in shelters or hostels, six were in private or subsidized housing, and two were staying with relatives or friends. Nine women/transwomen were Aboriginal or Métis, four were women of colour, and seven were white or of European descent. A quarter (5) of the participants were homeless or marginally housed for over 10 years, while seven women/transwomen were in this situation for up to one year. Overall, we had a diverse group of women/transwomen participating in our interviews. (More information about the participants is available in Appendix C, pp. 35-36.)

Phase II: Staged Photography: Arts-Based Participatory Research

The Advisory Board

To ensure that this project was based on participatory, anti-oppressive and empowerment approaches (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1999; Ristock & Pennel, 1996; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005), an advisory board was created consisting of women and transwomen who were experiencing homelessness. Advisory board members were recruited from the communities where the initial interviews had been conducted. Many of the members were asked to participate because of their reputations for supporting other homeless women. The seven advisory board members used their own experiences of being homeless and/or marginally housed to critically reflect on the information previously collected through interviews. The group first met to review the project material and develop the key themes through discussion and brainstorming. The members then traveled to four drop-in locations across the city to lead groups of women and transwomen in art-making that further explored, articulated and expanded the main themes of the research. Further, they helped in selecting photos and messages to be made into posters, and brainstorming about the feedback process and dissemination process. Each advisory board member received a $25 (or more depending on the time required) honorarium plus two transit tokens every time they attended meetings, art-making sessions, and public shows.

One of the significant messages that came out of the advisory board meetings was the importance of having support from other women who have shared experiences and 'have really been there themselves'. These shared experiences included being mistreated by shelters and social service workers, and/or being excluded and hated because of their gender, gender-identity or sexual orientation. It also included an understanding of how it feels to be isolated and how it feels to struggle to get by day to day. While advisory board members reported that their families of origin and social services provide help from time to time, they stated it was the compassion and care that they receive from each other that keeps them alive. The ways in which the advisory board members supported, included and empathized with each other truly embodied the project goals.   (For more information on their experiences, see pp. 26-27.)

> *"Transwomen [who are homeless] are at more risk of violence so they are always looking out for each other as some form of protection. Transwomen inform each other about which streets are safe, where's safe to stay and what parks and bridges are safe to access."*
>
> **-Trans service provider**

Why Arts-Based Research?

Various types of art have been used in the history of social work. For example, creative arts, such as theatre, painting, music, and poetry, have often been used in group settings with various populations and age groups such as children, youth, adults, elderly and people with cancer (Halperin, 2001; Lyons, 2000; Schnekenburger, 1995). Art has the power to bring people together in ways that verbal interaction alone may not. Despite a rich history of the application of art in social services, the combination of using arts for research in social work settings and working from a community-based participatory research perspective is a more recent phenomenon. Caroline Wang's Photovoice is a well-known example of the use of arts for participatory action research (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Cash & Powers, 2000).

Arts-based research uses art to explore questions, problems and solutions. The process of making art can allow for the creation of alternate and inclusive knowledge: "Arts-based research is meant not to 'master' an area but to uncover and express alternate … interpretations of the phenomena under scrutiny" (Barone, 2001, p.24). Since community-based research aims to be accessible to the community involved, using art as a way to carry out research allows community members to participate in a variety of ways regardless of different abilities such as literacy level or language. Involving communities through art not only encourages their participation but also promotes their sense of ownership and investment in the results. By working through art together, the participants created something that represents their collective experience. As a result, the end product is more accessible and inclusive. While a research report only reaches its audience at one level, art speaks to people on many.

"My biological family fed me, housed me and clothed me. But my street family kept me alive."

- A transwoman on the advisory board

Staged Photography as Arts-Based Research

The project utilized *staged photography* to conduct its arts-based research. Traditionally, in 'staged' photography the artists take on the role of the director, creating or staging an image (McDonald, 1999). They use models, props, costumes or lighting, often creating a sense of theatre that is then photographed. This kind of photography has ties to theatre, dance, sculpture, painting and literature. It is well suited to making stories from experiences because the images that are photographed are always out of context. The viewer is therefore invited to make the connections between the "before" and "after" sections of the story.

For the Coming Together project, the participants were asked to engage in a group or communal director's process, which gave them the opportunity to essentially construct a snapshot of their own realities. They were their own writers expressing their stories/truths, costume directors choosing costumes, directors directing the 'action', make-up artists, scene and backdrop painters. The advisory board members were given a 'crash course' on the artistic form, collaborative methodology and how to transform the language of experience into visual metaphors that were unique and not stereotypical. The role of the community artist who led this 'crash course' was therefore to listen, understand, question, challenge, suggest and photograph the stories. The philosophy guiding this process is based on the ideas associated with Cultural Democracy, an approach committed to promoting and supporting pluralism, participation and equity in community life. In other words, the goal of this approach is to give voice to those individuals whose voices have been silenced, marginalized and socially isolated – in this case, women and transwomen who are homeless or marginally housed. (For more information about staged photography, see pp. 31-32.)

Who Participated in the Art-Making Sessions?

Four art-making sessions took place in four drop-in centres across the city. Eight to fifteen women/transwomen participated in each session, with over 50 women participating overall. One group consisted of all transwomen and another group took place in an Aboriginal service agency. One group had at least seven women who were immigrants and non-native speakers of English. Through the art-making process, the participants spontaneously expressed themes related to their identities as women, transwomen, Aboriginal women, immigrant women, and linguistic/cultural minorities. All the participants signed consent forms before participating, and received $25 as an honorarium for their time and efforts and two transit tokens.

III. Main Findings and Recommendations

What Did We Learn from the Research?

From the results of our interviews with the women/transwomen and service providers, we have identified the following themes as important in understanding the lives of women/transwomen who have experienced homelessness:

- characteristics and functions of social networks for women/transwomen who are homeless and marginally housed;
- violence and trauma in the lives of women/transwomen;
- safe space, homes and housing; and
- changes needed in social services, agencies and policies.

Characteristics and Functions of Social Networks

Networks and informal groups amongst people on the streets help to challenge social exclusion and isolation. While poverty brings women/transwomen together out of necessity, it also limits what they have to share with each other. Within these networks, women/transwomen provide each other with protection, advocacy within the system, information, resources and social support. Reciprocity and loyalty are very important and interconnected. Quite often women will share everything they have (for example, money, tokens, tampons) with other women on the street, in spite of how little they have.

Marginalized women experience life on the street in certain ways, for example transwomen and sex-trade workers tend to stay together for safety, and do not often mingle with other women or men. Age, sexual orientation, immigration status (e.g., non-status immigrants), substance use, language background and Aboriginal status all affect how women survive and who they associate with.

Violence and Trauma in the Lives of Women/Transwomen & Safe Space, Homes and Housing

One striking finding was how common the experience of gender-based violence was in the lives of women/transwomen who are homeless or marginally housed. Violence was often both a cause and a consequence of homelessness for women/transwomen. Many women/transwomen on the streets have survived waves of violence and abuse since childhood, which was not only traumatizing, but made them more susceptible to future violence. Women/transwomen stressed that housing is appropriate and sustainable only when it is safe and free of violence. Caring for and supporting other women/transwomen is a primary source of healing and strength for many women on the streets, as is a sense of spirituality and assistance from non-judgmental social service workers. Transwomen and sex workers often form their own support networks which also help them to avoid violence. Years of struggling to survive has enabled many of the women we spoke with to develop very strong instincts for safety and trust. Many of the women/transwomen felt that they had accumulated street knowledge that they wanted to share with younger and less experienced women/transwomen. The women/transwomen we interviewed also articulated their visions for change, in terms of safe space, home and housing.

> " *I don't think the staff were trained well enough in understanding homeless women.*"
>
> **- Woman who has experienced homelessness**

Recommendations

The research participants were also critical of many social service providers and of the ways in which the social service system was set up.

Changes Needed in Social Services

Existing social services need to be grounded in the strengths and networks of the women/transwomen they serve. Many of the homeless or marginally housed women/transwomen felt that agencies are more accountable to funders than to the women they serve and that this should change. Women/transwomen reported that service providers do not always understand or respect the importance of their friendships and informal networks and shared their stories of being abused, shamed and criminalized within social service settings by service providers who are uncompassionate and abuse their power. This included instances of police violence. Agencies and allies that work with women/transwomen who are homeless or marginally housed need to advocate more actively for solutions! They need to be more vocal in the struggle to realize rights and achieve social justice. This includes being active on issues of housing and tenant rights, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, anti-violence, non-status rights, heterosexism and transphobia through coalition-building and increased visibility in the community. In addition, women/transwomen report that they would like to see more outreach so that they can receive more information about what resources and services are available to them (it is often difficult to keep up with frequent changes on available services as funding situations may change).

Need for More Aboriginal-Led Services

Given that colonialism is an ongoing and violent reality for Aboriginal women/transwomen living on the streets, more initiatives are needed to break such racist cycles. All service providers should be educated about the impacts of colonialism (e.g., sexual, physical, and psychological abuse committed in residential schools) and properly trained to work and communicate with Aboriginal women/transwomen. Aboriginal women/transwomen should also be able to access services that are provided for and by Aboriginal women/transwomen including ones that are specific to residential school survivors.

> *"Sometimes when you ask for a service it can take a long time. You have to come back after two weeks and ask again. You feel like you have to ask a lot of times before you get the service."*
>
> **- Woman who has experienced homelessness**

More Trans-Inclusive Services

For transwomen, being able to access women's services is essential for safety and survival. As a result of grassroots activism in this area, shelters and drop-ins have become more accessible to transwomen in Toronto. However, there is a continued need to raise awareness in order to break down barriers and challenge stereotypes and violence. There is also a need for more trans-only services, created by and for transwomen, such as counseling, housing, shelters and harm reduction services.

Creating Accessible Counselling Services

The stories of homeless women/transwomen included violence and trauma. The forms of violence that women/transwomen are subjected to, and how they experience this violence, is determined by their social location and the many aspects of their identity, including (but not limited to) gender identity, race, Aboriginal status, age, sexual orientation, experiences of displacement, imprisonment, abandonment, and childhood trauma. Colonialism and subsequent experiences in residential schools and foster care, transphobia and involvement in sex work (under unsafe working conditions) stand out as issues that are connected to extreme violence. Substance use is often a coping tool for managing and escaping the pain of trauma. Women/transwomen who are homeless or marginally housed need more counselling services in order to support their survival and healing. These counseling services need to be informal, flexible, based on a drop-in model and grounded in harm reduction approaches. Counselors need to understand the impacts of trauma (including the trauma of poverty, oppression and homelessness) in women/transwomen's lives.

Safe Space and Failures of Subsidized Housing

Women/transwomen need housing that is safe. Unsafe housing, where women experience violence and discrimination, is unsustainable and traumatizing.   The experience of violence and abuse at home is one of the main reasons why women/transwomen end up in the shelter system or living on the streets in the first place. Bare-bones, subsidized housing, on the outskirts of the Greater Toronto Area that functions without transitional or supportive services is not only unsustainable, but also isolates and undermines women/transwomen's networks. When trying to secure housing women/transwomen often face discrimination based on race, substance use, gender, gender identity or 'looking homeless'. Few believe the government will ever provide sufficient and/or appropriate social housing.

Posters We Created (Staged Photographs)

The following posters (pp. 22-25) were created from staged photographs taken at each drop-in location in Toronto: Adelaide Resource Centre for Women, Sistering – A Woman's Place, 519 Community Centre, and Native Women's Resource Centre. Women/transwomen in each site shared their own stories in response to questions that the research team and advisory board asked, many of which then became scenes enacted and highlighted as "staged photographs". The process of sharing personal stories in group settings and of how these individual stories became collective stories — listening to and being listened to—was an important part of this art-making process.

At all of the locations, the opportunity to make art with friends, have fun and share their stories was a major incentive leading to the participation of so many women/transwomen experiencing homelessness. This opportunity to 'come together' demonstrated the intrinsic value of the project for those who took part. Through their staged photography scenes, the participants' stories and truths were depicted in ways that showed the diversity of their voices and the strength, courage and knowledge they had developed.

Coming Together
Strength and Healing through Helping

"I have a good set of ears.
I can sit and listen to someone
cry cause I know it's helping them
and sometimes it helps me..."

Participants focused on expressing how they supported each other on an individual and community level with respect to issues of poverty, isolation and accessing social services.

"I feel better 'cause I'm helping..."

Coming Together
Courage Through Friendships

The scenes created here depicted experiences of exclusion based on transphobia, homophobia, gender discrimination, poverty and isolation. The participants acted out ways that these oppressions have been challenged through the support and friendship they give each other.
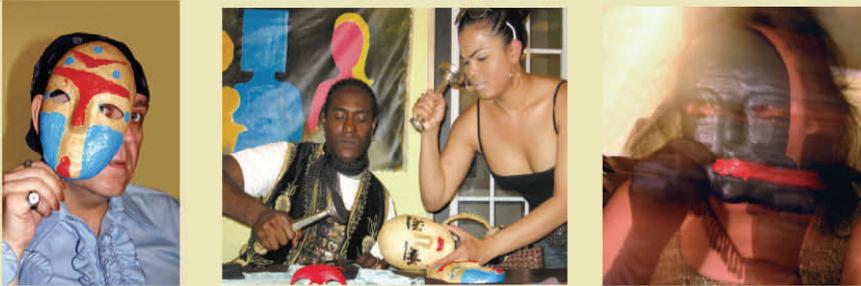
"We are constantly being on guard, because as transwomen we are at more risk of violence so we are always looking out for each other as a form of protection."

Coming Together
Home Should be Safe and Fun

"When (we) get together...it's just to have fun and enjoy each other's company... So the little bit of joy, the ray of sunshine, the pat on the back, the piece of bannock...that enriches (us) a lot."

"Bare-bones housing without support is unsustainable and isolating for women."

Participants focused on expressing issues related to housing and homelessness by creating their ideal homes and places where they received comfort and inclusion. In these scenes, the homes were more than just roofs over the participants' heads, they were also places of safety, fun, culture and nature.

Coming Together
Surviving Addictions

"To be able to live free, not be harmed, to be around love and respect and understanding and lots of happiness..."

"That's what I need. A Safe Place."

Participants expressed the pain and trauma of violence against women, the tragedy of addictions and problems of language barriers in accessing support and preventing social isolation.

IV. Impact of the Research

"[Participating in the art-making sessions] meant a lot to people. [There was] not a sad face in the group by the end – people came in kind of serious and were laughing and smiling by the end."
"Lots of laughter [in art-making sessions]… [This project was] not only research but medicine."

— All Quotes are Comments by Advisory Board Members

Words such as "amazing" and "mind-blowing" cannot seem to fully capture the depth of our experiences as the research team. So we wonder: Why? What was so powerful about this research project?

When asked about what their experience with the project has been, advisory board members provided the following comments, most of them with excitement:

"[I] told everybody about the project!"
"Positive and healing thing….[because I] talked about the negative experiences. [I] feel less alone when others say they felt [the] same way."

Two of the seven advisory board members were housed following the research experience. One of them started talking about going back to school. Two people stopped using drugs and alcohol, or drastically reduced their use. We would not claim to be the cause for their success; however, it seems that they were able to capitalize on the opportunities presented to them, making it a life-changing experience for themselves. So then what helped?

Multi-Level Empowerment

"There were a lot people I've seen around for years but I've never got to know until this project…That was possible because of the sharing of stories. Sometimes it's hard to even get people to listen to your stories."
"Study conducted as not a study. Open forum… [I] liked that."

The research process employed an empowerment perspective to help ensure that the research sessions were an open forum and space for women/transwomen to express themselves through stories and arts. Participants, in turn, took advantage of the opportunity to empower themselves. For example, exhibiting the art provided an opportunity for public

recognition of their experience. Months later, several participants still ask some of the research members about when the next art session will be. It is "their" project as much as it is ours. The staged photography sessions provided a space to reflect upon their painful realities and dream about their own future in playful manners, which was very powerful since many homeless women/transwomen do not have such space to do so in their daily lives. Finally, what was perhaps the most empowering part of this research project for many participants was the knowledge that their voices would be heard at higher levels, which was also distinctly different from other art programs they might have attended in the past.

Transformation from Consumers to Helpers

> *"[I] like to be more on the helpful side than on the doing side."*
> *"At first [I went] for $25 [honorarium] but then it became more – listening and sharing and realizing that I could relate."*
> *"I am a street person…just minding money and food. But I was needed [for this project and it] made a difference."*

For advisory board members, it was significant that they are now *legitimate* helpers. This last comment is particularly touching and very important because it highlights how excluded she was from society in her daily life, and how the responsibility she undertook for the research became a transformative experience for her. In social services, women/ transwomen who are homeless/marginally housed will participate in different kinds of activities but they are ultimately "consumers" and not "helpers". Listening to other women/transwomen and relating to their experiences was a major part of helping that the advisory board members provided for our project.

Trusting the Process
For the research team, the biggest lesson learned was in trusting the process. The art-making sessions were often chaotic with multiple groups creating art pieces and putting on costumes at the same time. We were sometimes not sure if everything – from brainstorming, identifying stories, visualization, painting backdrops, costume selection, enactment, and photography – could be finished within the two to three hour time limit. However, in all four locations, the participants "got" the activities right away and were highly cooperative in finishing the work within the time limit. Advisory board members listened to the participants' stories attentively, reassured those who were not comfortable with their art skills and helped wherever they were needed. As researchers, we often feel the need to "control" the process and here it was quite the opposite. The control was ultimately secured because it was shared – where the research team let go, the participants took hold, which created a more empowering space for all.

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Appendix A: Research Methodology

The methodological approach of the Coming Together Project was twofold, employing both a community-based research approach (e.g., Flicker & Savan, 2006; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998) using a grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2000; Straus & Corbin, 1998) which informed the entire research process, as well as utilizing staged photography as an arts-based research method for identification of key issues, action and dissemination. In Phase I, in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews for both interested service providers/researchers (13 people) and service users (20 people) were conducted at either the participant's location or at a mutually designated location.

Grounded Theory
Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is a qualitative research methodology in which the process of data collection and analysis is conducted simultaneously to allow explanations of the phenomena to emerge from the data. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Initially, the researchers attempted to suspend our knowledge as much as possible (bracketing; Caelli, 2001) by utilizing culture review, horizontalisation and open coding techniques (Creswell, 1998; McLeod, 2001), so that the themes and categories unique to the current data were allowed to emerge. Multiple coding strategies were used, including open, axial and thematic coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The emerged themes were further compared and contrasted to each other by complex intersecting identities of our participants (constant comparison method; Charmaz, 2000). NVivo qualitative software was used to assist in data management and analysis. Previously interviewed women and service users from the Advisory Board as well as service providers were invited to give feedback on the study findings (member check/member validation process). The themes arising out of the arts-based research were also analyzed for theorization of experiences of women/transwomen. After the Phase II data analysis and initial dissemination process were complete, the research team and advisory board went back to the four art-making sites for further feedback.

Staged Photography as Arts-Based Research
> "Staged photography is born out of boredom or dissatisfaction with the world. The photographer wants to see the world as a place where anything is possible-a place full of more beauty, more meaning, more play, more symbolism" (McDonald, 1999).

The artistic form was selected based on:
1) The artist's experience in teaching art with homeless and marginally housed women and her commitment to applying a collaborative methodology and form of artistic expression in which all could participate;
2) The time constraint of two-three hours for the discussion and distillation of ideas and experiences into visual form;

3) The need for an art process which would be meaningful and engaging for the participants and where the learning process would be minimal; and

4) The capacity to present their stories and truths in a way that clearly showed diversity of their voices as well as the strength, courage and knowledge they had developed - they had to be the heroes of their stories.

Advisory Board Members

The advisory board members were given a 'crash course' on the artistic form, collaborative methodology and how to transform the language of experience into visual metaphors that were unique and not stereotypical. The role of the community artist, research team and advisory board was to then listen to, understand, question, challenge, suggest and photograph the stories.

Philosophy and Approach

The guiding philosophy for the art process was based on the ideas associated with Cultural Democracy, an approach committed to promoting and supporting pluralism, participation and equity in community life. In other words, the goal of using this approach was to give voice to those individuals whose voices have been silenced, marginalized and socially isolated, in this case, women and transwomen experiencing homelessness or marginal housing.

This project focused primarily on instrumental values - the outcomes associated with arts-based research. We were particularly interested in collecting visual information on the experiences of support or lack of support that homeless and marginally housed women had with each other. However, many of the participants, including the advisors, were past or present participants of community arts programs at the various drop-ins. A number of them had had several exhibitions where they regularly sold their work or were part of community plays and drama through organizations such as the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). They therefore also had an understanding of the intrinsic value of art, that is, its capacity to move people, to affect them emotionally and spiritually. In the opinion of the community artist, it was this value that strongly engaged the participants. The art form was new and challenging, integrating a variety of art media such as acting, painting and costume design. The opportunity to make more art with friends, have fun and share stories was a major incentive for participation.

Our art-making experiences at the four drop-ins were varied. Below is a brief synopsis of the art-making process, including some of the issues that the participants focused on. In one drop-in centre, the women focused on expressing how they supported each other on an individual and community level with respect to issues of poverty, isolation and accessing social services. In another setting, the women expressed the pain and trauma of violence against women, the tragedy of addictions and the problem of language in accessing support and preventing social isolation. In another group, transwomen expressed problems of support and inclusion based on transphobia, homophobia, gender discrimination, poverty and isolation. In the final setting, a group consisting of largely Aboriginal women and women of colour focused on expressing issues related to housing and homelessness by creating their ideal homes and places where they received comfort and inclusion.

Appendix B: Getting the Word Out

In community-based participatory action research, it is very important that completed research projects will not just sit on our shelves, but that its messages will reach far and wide to challenge the system and change the situation of those affected by the issues. In order to spread the word to the community, social services, government and academy, who all play a role in social change, we have engaged or are planning to engage in the activities described below. If you can help us in distributing our posters and this research report, or in any other way to get the word out, please let us know! (comingtogetherproject@gmail.com)

Here is what the research team and advisory board have done so far and are planning to do in the near future:

For the General Public
- Public show of staged photographs
  - University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work, November 14-29, 2006
  - Metro Hall Rotunda, February 20-23, 2007
- News coverage: "Social Work project combines art and research" News @ UofT, November 14, 2006
- TV coverage: OMNI-2 Mandarin Weekend Program (February 2007).
- Website about this project scheduled to launch in 2007 (web address on inside back cover)
- Production of posters and this booklet to be distributed to service providers, funders, policy makers, activists, academics and general public.

For Policy Makers & Service Providers
- Distributing posters and this research report
- Fact sheet (planned)
- Briefing international conference delegates
  - *Community-Campus Partnership for Health* 10th Annual International Conference Site Visit (April 2007)

For Academia
The Coming Together research team has received the Community-Based Research Award of Merit Second Place, given by the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives, Wellesley Institute, and the University College at the University of Toronto.
As part of the grounded theory orientation of this research, theorization from this research project is still under way as we continue to reflect on and analyze the research outcomes. Through presentations in national and international conferences, papers written for journal publications and classroom presentations, we hope to provide improved theoretical understandings of women's and transwomen's intersecting marginality and resiliency.

We also hope that sharing women's/transwomen's messages in the academy may help students and academics to use this new knowledge in their professional work (as nurses, social workers, etc.) and in their research and teaching (e.g. talking about homeless women from an empowerment perspective).

Presentations at scholarly conferences:
- Sakamoto, I., Ricciardi, J., Mandamin, R., Plyler, J., Grewal, L., & Lobo-Molnar, B. (2006 June). Street family and mutual aid: How homeless women support each other. Paper presented at the *Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work Annual Conference,* York University, Toronto, Canada, May 31-June 3, 2006.

- Sakamoto, I., Ricciardi, J., Plyler, J., & Wood, N. (2007 March). Coming together: Homeless women, housing and social support. *Transnationalism, Arts and Activism Conference*, University of Toronto.

- Sakamoto, I., Ricciardi, J., Plyler, J., & Wood, N. (2007 August). "Coming Together": Arts-Based Community-Based Research with Homeless Women and Transwomen. *American Psychological Association Annual Conference*, San Francisco, USA.

Classroom Presentations

- University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work
- University of Toronto Faculty of Nursing
- Ryerson University Internationally Educated Social Work Professionals Certificate Program

Evaluating What We Did and Planning for the Future

One of our goals in conducting this research project was to provide opportunities for empowerment, engagement, capacity building and leadership enhancement for the participating women/transwomen who often experience social exclusion in multiple ways. Moving forward, we would like to further reflect upon our research process and explore more formally what worked and where improvements could be made. What lessons can we learn from this research project? This will also lead us to consider our next steps after the project is completed. How can we continue to promote the messages that our study participants have voiced to us? What roles can we, as academics and service providers, play in helping to actualize the women/transwomen's visions for inclusion and for safe housing? We are in the process of evaluating our project while still engaging in dissemination efforts to affect change. It is our sincere hope that those of you who read this report and/or attend our public showing will continue to reflect upon these questions and to make a difference, even in a small way, to help improve the situation of women/transwomen who are experiencing homelessness in the city you live in.

Appendix C: Demographics of In-Depth Interviews Participants

The following pie charts represent the demographics of the women/transwomen who participated in our in-depth interviews in Phase I.

Age

- 45% — 40-59
- 55% — 25-39

Legend:
- 25-39
- 40-59

Ethnicity/Race

- 20% — Women of colour
- 35% — White/European descent
- 45% — Aboriginal/Métis

Legend:
- Aboriginal/Métis
- White/European descent
- Women of colour

Gender Identity

- 30% — Transwomen
- 70% — Women

Legend:
- Women
- Transwomen
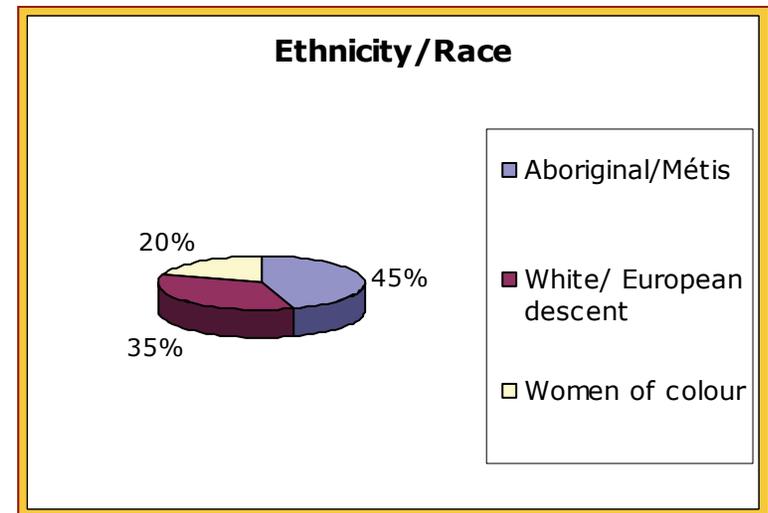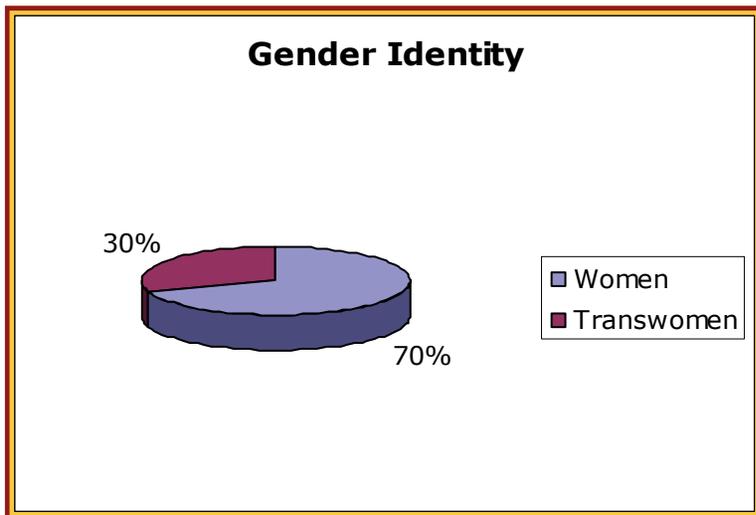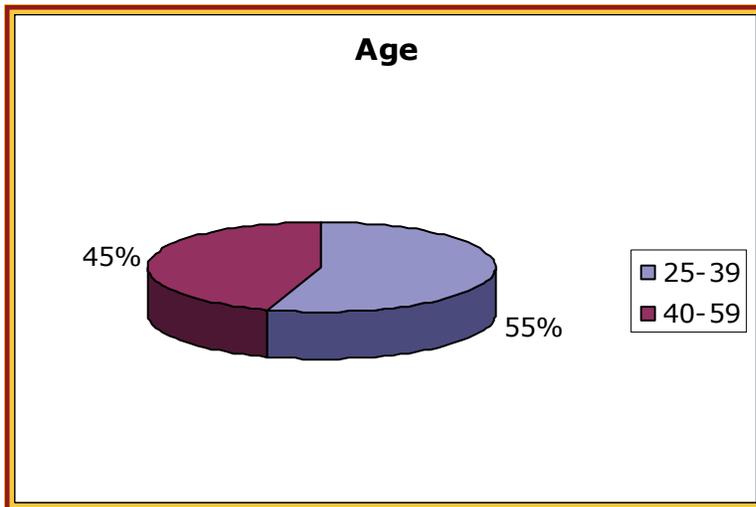
Duration of Homelessness/Marginal Housing

25%
35%
10%
30%

- Up to 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10+ years
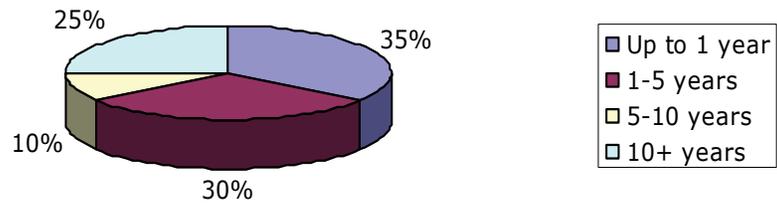
Places of Living/Staying

10%
10%
35%
20%
25%

- Shelter/ Hostel
- On the street
- Private housing
- Subsidized Housing
- Relatives/ friends
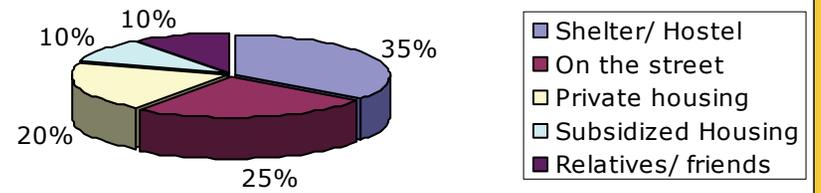
Appendix D: Key Informant Interview Guide

1. What is your understanding of street culture and street families (informal support networks, friendship networks), and how do women/transwomen fit into it?
2. How do women/transwomen look out for themselves and for each other?
3. What forms of support, outside of formal services, do women/transwomen use?
4. Do these informal networks intersect with formal services? If so, how?
5. What are the negative and positive aspects of these groups?
6. Do you see any patterns emerging in these groups in terms of race, class, education, age, sexual orientation, immigration, children or any other identity grouping?
7. What can be done to support existing networks and groups and at the micro, mezzo and policy levels?

Appendix E: In-Depth Interview Guide

How do you identify your gender?	
What is your age group?	
How do you describe your ethnic/racial background and/or Aboriginal status?	
For how long have you been homeless and/or marginally housed?	
Places Stayed (Multiple answers – from the most recent location)	1.
	2., etc.

1.   Where are you sleeping/staying at the moment?

2.   How long have you been in this current situation?

3.   Where do you spend your time/hang out?

4a.   Who do you usually hang out with/spend your time with?

4b.   Can you tell me a little bit about the most important people in your life?

5.   In the places you hang out, are there people or groups of people that you don't like/stay away from?

6.   What issues are important to you and to other women in similar situations?

7.   Is there anyone you turn to for help with the issues that you just mentioned (above)?

8.   How have you helped out any of your friends when they need it?

9.   What can agencies do to help your situation?

Appendix F: Acknowledgements and Funders

Acknowledgements

Thank you, on behalf of the Coming Together Research Project, to the following agencies for providing us with the space to conduct interviews and art-based projects.

Adelaide Resource Centre for Women http://www.toronto.ca/housing/pdf/tdin_sept2006.pdf
Fred Victor Women's Drop-in Centre http://www.fredvictor.org/
Native Women's Resource Centre http://www.nativewomenscentre.org/
The 519 Community Centre http://www.the519.org/
Sistering—A Woman's Place http://www.sistering.org/
Regent Park Community Health Centre http://www.regentparkchc.org/g-home.htm

Funders

"The most important thing to me is finding a place to stay that is safe"

—Woman who has experienced homelessness

The original print version of this report was released in February 2007. This updated, Internet version was released in summer, 2007:

http://www.socialwork.utoronto.ca/index.php?section=479

 [select 'Coming Together Project', 'Research Report']

Or, visit http://www.socialwork.utoronto.ca/aswri, choose 'Coming Together Project' under 'Research Projects'.

For more information on the Coming Together Research Project,
please contact Professor Izumi Sakamoto, University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work at
izumi.sakamato@utoronto.ca or comingtogetherproject@gmail.com

The views and opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Wellesley Institute, our funder.