

The Changing Face of Women's Shelters



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

- to assess the needs of women currently entering domestic violence shelters

WHO PARTICIPATED IN OUR STUDY?

- 100 women from two domestic violence shelters

Mean time from entering shelter to participating in the interview: 4 days

- 60% of women who entered shelter during the data collection period participated

Age Range: 18-67 years; mean age 31

Education:

- 58% did not complete high school

Employment:

- 96% were not doing paid work

Yearly Family Income:

- 76% reported a yearly family income of less than \$30,000
- 58% were on social assistance

Ethnic background:

- 84% identified as Indigenous
- 11% identified as White
- 5% identified as another ethnicity

Reserve:

- 53% had lived on reserve
- 21% reported coming to shelter from a reserve

Citizenship:

- 94% were born in Canada
- 3% were landed immigrants or refugees
- 3% were Canadian citizens born elsewhere

Children:

- 85% had children
- 47% reported having three or more children
- 54% had at least one child that was not living with them
- 45% brought at least one child with them to shelter

Pregnancy:

- 19% knew or suspected they were pregnant
- Another 10% were unsure if they were pregnant or not

Justice System:

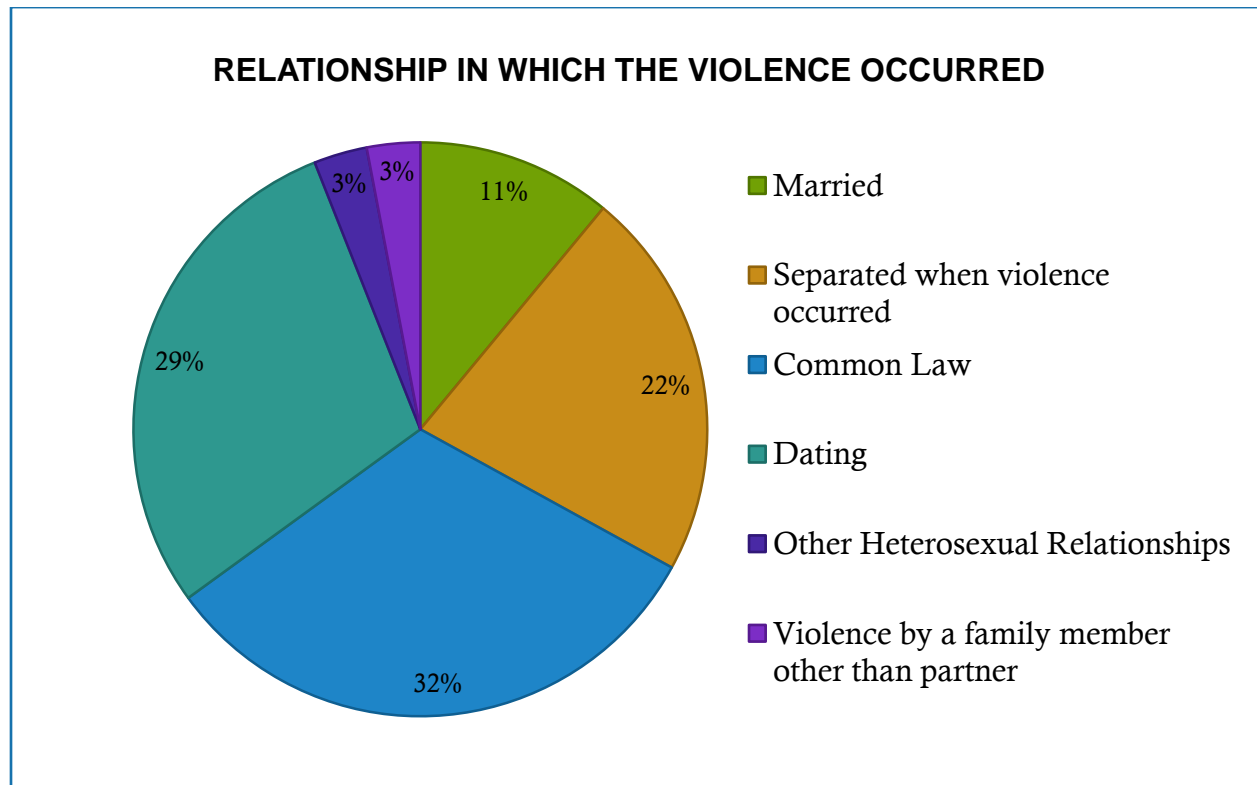
- 44% reported justice system involvement
- 38% reported that their abuser was involved in a gang
- 12% reported past gang involvement; 2% reported current involvement
- 13% reported past sex trade involvement; 2% reported current involvement

WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE?

Types of Violence Experienced:

Almost all women reported emotional abuse, verbal abuse, and controlling behaviour.

- 91% reported physical violence
- 46% reported stalking
- 40% reported sexual abuse
- 6% reported spiritual abuse
- 5% reported that their partner forced them to consume alcohol or drugs
- 3% reported that their partner withheld important medications from them



Note: 99% of the violence occurred in heterosexual relationships

Cohabitation:

- 70% of women were living with their abusive partner prior to coming to shelter

Relationship Length:

- Length of relationship ranged from 2 weeks to 30 years; mean 5 years
- Length of separation ranged from 1 week to 4 years; mean 9 months
- Length of aggression ranged from a few days to 20 years; mean 3 years

Previous Abusive Relationships:

- 70% reported at least one previous abusive relationship

Intervention:

- 61% had participated in previous counseling related to family violence
- 89% reported police intervention (range 1-50 contacts with police; mean 8.6)
- 53% reported seeking medical care for injuries inflicted by a partner (range 1-25 times that they sought medical care for injuries; mean 4)

WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT WOMEN'S SHELTER USAGE?

Entering Shelter:

- 77% stated that they entered shelter within 7 days of experiencing violence
- Length of current shelter stay ranged from 1-52 days; mean 18 days

Previous Stays in Shelter:

- 70% reported a previous stay in shelter

SHELTER DATA INDICATES THAT:

- 66% had previously stayed in shelter in Manitoba
 - The mean number of prior shelter stays ranged from 1-48, mean 5.4
- Total number of days in shelter ranged from 3-334; mean 55
- Number of different shelters used ranged from 1-6; mean 2
- Women had used shelters for up to 24 years

WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT WITH OTHER SOCIAL SERVICES?

Housing:

- 40% have lived in Manitoba Housing
- Prior to coming to shelter:
 - 67% lived in rented accommodations
 - 21% lived with family or friends
- Immediately prior to coming to shelter:
 - 43% were living with family or friends
 - 8% were staying at another shelter

Agency Involvement:

- 41% reported current involvement with Child and Family Services (CFS)

- An additional 23% reported past CFS involvement
- 56% of women reported involvement with other agencies (e.g., addictions programs, Probation Services, Victim Services, Life's Journey, Legal Aid etc.)

WHAT ARE WOMEN'S NEEDS?

Primary Reason for Accessing Shelter:

- Fear of harm (77%)
- Housing (10%)

MOST IMPORTANT NEEDS

- Safety from their partner (92%)
- Housing (91%)
- Mental health care (46%)
- Legal help (33%)
- Help with CFS (24%)
- Help with substance use (23%)
- Physical health care (21%)
- Help with education (19%)
- Help with employment (16%)

"I hope they'll help me with housing applications and help me to become more stable with my emotions so I'm not feeling shitty all the time. I want counselling. I want to boost my self-esteem and not to feel worthless. It would be nice to have people telling you that you're a good person."

Factors Affecting the Decision to Leave Shelter:

- Accessing housing would be the main factor in their decision to leave shelter (66%)
- Other factors influencing women's decision to leave shelter included:
 - Feeling safe: 30%
 - Improved Self-esteem: 26%
 - Emotional Stability: 19%
 - Recovery from Addictions: 13%
 - Financial Stability: 12%
 - Legal action taken against partner: 8%
- 76% of women reported that they would need permanent housing

WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT WOMEN'S HEALTH?

Overall Health:

- 60% reported they were living with a disability or long-term illness
 - 24% reported both debilitating physical and mental health issues
 - 19% reported a debilitating physical health issue only
 - 17% reported a debilitating mental health issue only
- 56% indicated that their disability or long-term illness limited their activity
- 44% did not have a family doctor
- 65% had visited the emergency room in the past year
- 36% reported being concerned about their current physical health

Mental Health:

- 64% acknowledged a history of mental health concerns
- 33% received mental health care from their family physician
- 31% were currently taking medication for a mental health issue
- 51% had been formally diagnosed with a mental illness
- 45% reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, or both
- 17% reported symptoms of other serious mental illnesses
- On a measure of risk for anxiety/ depression and suicidality:
 - 6% were classified as low risk
 - 54% were classified as moderate risk
 - 40% were classified as high risk
- 53% of women reported being concerned about their current mental health.

“Sometimes I want to kill myself, like you know, I feel so depressed, overwhelmed and very confused at the same time and I just don’t know what to do with myself.”

Substance Use:

- 54% of women acknowledged a history of substance use concerns
- On a screening measure for alcohol or drug problems:
 - 90% indicated problematic drinking in the past
 - 40% indicated problematic drinking currently
- 24% of women reported being concerned about the current use of drugs/alcohol

“Staying sober- I need to pull myself together because I’m falling apart.”

HOW SHELTERS HELP

Women are thankful that they have access to a shelter. They generally feel safe, comfortable, and less burdened while they are in shelter. They appreciate that shelter gives them time away from their abuser while being supported and having time to sort out their priorities.

WOMEN APPRECIATED:

- Staff recognizing their achievements and skills
- A broad understanding of violence
- The ability to speak with the same counselor each time
- When their children had access to counseling as well
- Unstructured groups or ‘sharing circles’
- The ability to smudge or speak with an Elder
- A variety of activities (e.g., beading class, yoga class, journaling materials)
- Being able to take a taxi to shelter
- Policies designed to keep them safe (e.g., zero tolerance policy, bed bug policy)
- Shelter connections to second stage housing

WOMEN SUGGESTED:

- Having a private space in which to place their belongings so items are not stolen
- Supports for children including childcare and counselling
- Staff ensuring fair and equitable resident participation in chore activities
- Developing a predictable schedule that is clearly communicated to residents
- The ability to access addictions-related or CFS mandated programming in shelter
- The ability to access trained mental health professionals within shelter
- Ensuring staff can make referrals to mental health services outside of shelter
- Arranging transport to other locations (e.g., hospitals, pharmacies, law courts)
- Flexibility regarding the 30 day cap on shelter stays
- Ensuring that there are enough staff members working

CONCLUSIONS

- I. The majority of women seeking shelter are Indigenous and poor, with many living with disabilities - Services need to be integrated and address the intersections of violence, poverty, culture, and disability
- II. Most women have a history of abusive relationships, have been in shelter before, and have previously received counseling related to intimate partner violence - Shelters need to work with women to identify and address issues which put them at continued risk for violence
- III. The majority of women report mental health, physical health, and/or substance use problems; almost all women in shelter are at increased risk for anxiety, depression, and suicidality, with a large proportion classified as 'high risk' - Shelters need to examine their role in providing short-term support to address mental health and addiction issues as well as assisting women access ongoing physical, mental health, and addiction services
- IV. Lack of affordable housing is a major problem affecting women's risk for violence and their readiness to leave shelter - There is a need to work with other systems to develop a housing strategy
- V. Many women entering shelter are mothers (or pregnant), with many having involvement with Child and Family Services - Shelters need to address women's childcare needs in shelter as well as helping women make a longer-term plan to address parenting issues (including child welfare concerns)
- VI. Women perceive shelters to be very helpful but they also have ideas for improvements - There are changes in policy and services that could increase their effectiveness

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