

Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support

-- A community arts-based research project --

Executive Summary

“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.

In consultation with the advisory board, the research team created posters from the photos taken at each art-making site, focusing on one of the themes, or “scenes” that the women depicted through art. The artwork and photographs resulting from these sessions have subsequently been presented in various ways including posters and public exhibitions. The posters created include:

[Poster 1: Strength and Healing through Helping](#)

[Poster 2: Surviving Addictions](#)

Poster 3: Courage Through Friendships (focus on transwomen)
Poster 4: Home Should be Safe and Fun (focus on Aboriginal women)

The research results are summarized into a research report that is written in accessible language to allow wider dissemination: **Izumi Sakamoto, Josie Ricciardi, Jen Plyler & Natalie Wood (2007). *Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support (Updated Internet version)*. Toronto: Centre for Applied Social Research, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.**

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 counseling services).

These research efforts are followed by further dissemination and evaluation, as well as theorization according to a grounded theory approach.

Research Team and Helpers

Principal Investigator: Professor Izumi Sakamoto, Ph.D. Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto;

Co-Investigator: Josie Ricciardi, MSW, RSW, Regent Park Community Health Centre;

Project Coordinators: Jen Plyler, MSW, and Aisha Chapra, MSW;

Community Artist: Natalie Wood, M.A.;

Community Partner: Angela Robertson, Sistering – A Woman's Place;

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

Researchers: Lily Grewal, MSW; Rose Cameron, Ph.D. Candidate & Billie Allan, MSW;

Students: Bixidu Lobo-Molnar, Matthew Chin, & Nadia Bacheu.

Project funded by: [The Wellesley Institute](#), Royal Bank Fellowship, [Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto](#) & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Institutional Grant.

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