

Caring For Our Homeless

Keep the Circle Strong

By Anishnawbe Health Toronto – Street Patrol

Le rapport final du comité consultatif du ministre du Logement de l'Ontario sur l'Année internationale du logement des sans-abri a révélé qu'environ 40 000 personnes ont recours aux centres d'hébergement provisoire chaque année. Le comité a aussi découvert que le phénomène des sans-abri est en train de changer de visage. Le paysage des sans-abri, naguère constitué d'hommes blancs d'un certain âge, évolue rapidement vers un mode de vie pour des jeunes gens, des jeunes femmes, des enfants et même pour des familles entières. Le phénomène a pris une telle ampleur que le Canada et les États-Unis ne peuvent plus justifier leur inaction en affirmant que la majorité des sans-abri des deux pays sont des personnes qui méritent leur sort, notamment des personnes seules, alcooliques et toxicomanes.

*But I looked again
And I saw there, alone in desolation,
A woman, reviled and ravished and
destitute,
Her birthright stolen.
The teachings of her grandmothers had
been replaced
By thoughts that don't belong.
Yet she is the mother of our children.
Without her there is no future.*

*But wait my brothers, let us take a
closer look.
There stands our mothers and our
grandmothers.
She is our wives and our sisters.
Without her we cannot go.
For that is how it was made to be,
That time so long ago.*

*I give thanks for this new day.
Kitchi Meegwetch!*

—Arthur Solomon, "Songs for the People"

The plethora of literature of the plight of the homeless attests to the growing magnitude of this problem in North America. Homelessness in itself is not a new phenomenon; however, the almost sudden appearance of women and their children on the streets has resulted in a renewed interest in and concern for the homeless.

There is little doubt that the United Nations General Assembly's decision to name 1987 the "International Year of Shelter for the Homeless" increased awareness of the issue. Many papers on homelessness have appeared on the academic scene during the past decade. These papers have tried to answer difficult questions, such as "Who are the homeless?" "What can be done for them?" and "What are the reasons for homelessness?" Most of the research has been conducted in the larger cities of the United States; the generalizability of these findings to the Canadian population is therefore somewhat limited. Canada and the United States are different in terms of geography, climate, economy and political and social welfare systems. Canada's harsh climate means that one must have access to proper shelter in order to survive the cold winter months.

Despite an increase in the amount of literature on homelessness sparked by the appearance of women on the streets and in the shelters, there are very few studies that concentrate solely on the unique plight of homeless women. The literature on homeless people focusses almost entirely on homeless men. Canadian social workers and other professionals seeking relevant literature on homeless women will quickly find that comparatively little research has been done on the economic and social factors of female homelessness.

Many researchers have found the process of defining homelessness to be a difficult task because the boundaries are not distinct. In its most simple definition, homelessness means to be without home or shelter. But what about those persons who would be homeless were they not temporarily housed in institutions such as jails, prisons, hospitals, hostels, or detoxification units? Or those persons sleeping in their cars or vans because they cannot afford the rent of an apartment? These examples illustrate the impracticality of deciding on a concrete definition of homelessness. Alex Jacobs, the coordinator of the Street Patrol Programme at Anishnawbe Health Toronto, agrees with researchers on this point. He says that he has observed at least three distinct

groups of homeless people during his 11 months with the Street Patrol: chemically-dependent persons, mentally ill persons, and those who have been victims of abuse (physical, emotional, or sexual).

In this article, homelessness will be defined as the inability to obtain and maintain access to adequate housing. Adequate housing is affordable, secure and safe. Therefore, we must also include in this working definition of homelessness those persons who are living in cheap hotels, cars, vans, or shelters and missions because these are their only housing options.

The final report of the Ontario Minister of Housing's Advisory Committee on the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless found that up to 40,000 people use the emergency hostels in the province every year. They also found that the face of homelessness is changing. What was once a phenomenon traditionally dominated by older, white males is fast becoming a way of life for young men *and* women, children, and even whole families. The problem of homelessness is of such magnitude that Canada and the United States can no longer justify their inaction by claiming their nation's homeless consist mainly of undeserving, single people with alcohol and drug addictions.

The lack of affordable housing geared towards low-income families is a large part of the problem. The three most commonly cited reasons for the shortage of affordable housing are deinstitutionalization, urban gentrification, and reduced federal housing and income maintenance subsidies. In the case of women, it is easy to see the connection between the lack of subsidized housing and homelessness. With separation, a woman's standard of living decreases by 73 per cent.

The Street Patrol of Anishnawbe Health keeps statistics on its clientele not only for funding purposes, but also because these figures help the Patrol better serve its clients. It has found that 15 per cent of the clientele are women. What does it mean to be a woman on the streets? More specifically, what does it mean to be a chemically-dependent woman on the streets? And what services are in place to meet their needs? Daphne Johnston of Community Health Resources Centre, Anishnawbe Health Toronto, says that they are finding that many of the women that they come into contact with have suffered some form of abuse. This abuse can take the form of physical abuse or emotional abuse, but in the case of homeless women, it is often sexual abuse. This finding is similar to the findings of a 1990 study by J. M. Teets that looked at issues of sexuality with chemically-dependent women. This study found a high incidence of incest and childhood sexual abuse among chemically-dependent women. As sexual abuse has only recently become an issue opened for discussion, few professionals are trained to work with abuse survivors. Very little is known about homeless women with a history of such abuse.

Alyx (a pseudonym) is now in her late 30s. She started to drink when she was 12 years old. She has been on the street since she was 15. She has been on the same grate on Queen Street in downtown Toronto for the last 12 years. Alyx is Native. She, and many others like her, call the street home.

I wish you could meet Alyx. I wish you could see her eyes light up with hope when she speaks about her future (maybe she can get into a treatment centre soon...). I wish you could see her dark eyes brighten when she talks about her children, and how quickly

they cloud over and fill with pain when she remembers that they are not with her. And I wish you could see her eyes flash with anger and hurt when she thinks someone is laughing at her. I wish more people could look past the dirty jeans and the worn-out shoes and see her intelligence, her humour, her courage, and her humanity.

Alyx is not very different from you or I. She laughs, she cries, she has hopes and dreams. One of those dreams is to get off the street and the booze and into a Native treatment centre. But she has already been refused at one alcohol treatment centre because of her history of drug abuse. With the door closed on her again, Alyx left the detoxification centre she was at and went on a drinking binge. I lifted her out of a laneway littered with garbage and broken glass and helped her to her grate on Queen Street. "They wouldn't let me in [to the treatment centre]," she said tiredly. "I know, Alyx," I said. "I know."

There are several places for women in crisis to go in Toronto: Women in Transition, St Vincent de Paul Rendu House, Street Haven at the Crossroads, Toronto Community Hostel, Salvation Army Evangeline Residence, Nellie's, Council Fire, Anduvyan, and, of course, Anishnawbe Health.

le groupe

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Contact : A.D.B.S. - Colette Galland ou Brigitte Yvon-Deyme, 25, rue Claude Tillier, 75012 Paris, France