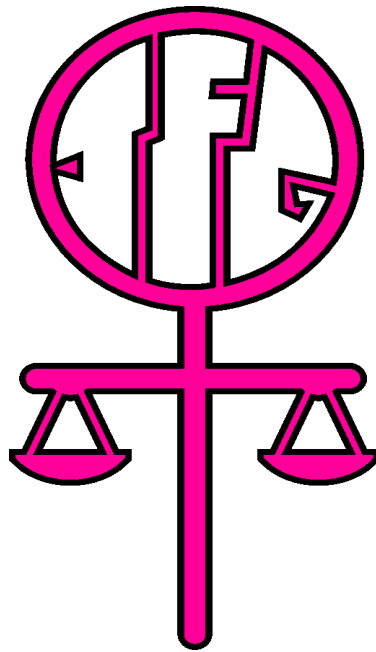


Federal Finance Committee
Pre-Budget Consultations 2011



Submission by
Justice for Girls Outreach Society
(British Columbia)
August 2010

About Justice for Girls

Justice for Girls, founded in 1999, is a non-profit organization and registered charity based in Vancouver, British Columbia, that promotes freedom from violence and poverty, and equality for teenage girls who live in poverty. Justice for Girls recently completed a three year Status of Women Canada funded project, the Housing Strategy for Girls Living in Poverty, examining what services and measures (locally, provincially and federally) are needed to prevent girl homelessness in Canada. The federal budget recommendations in this brief stem from our Housing Strategy.

Summary and Key Recommendation

Most youth shelters across Canada and government programs for homeless youth do not respond to the specific needs of girls, and the needs of Aboriginal, racialized and lesbian girls in particular. Youth safe houses/shelters are co-educational, can be unsafe for girls and do not respond to their needs, especially as many homeless girls are escaping male violence. A 2007 British Columbia wide survey of 762 homeless youth aged 12 to 18 found that 57% of the girls had been sexually abused.¹ Given these considerations, transition houses specifically for teenage girls must become the emergency response to girl homelessness, as opposed to blanket 'youth-homelessness' initiatives. In order for gendered support programs and girl-specific emergency and longer-term housing to be created across Canada for homeless teenage girls, **the federal government must allocate specific funding within federal anti-homelessness and other federal housing initiatives towards housing and programs for the prevention of girl homelessness.**

What is Girl Homelessness?

Girl homelessness is any situation in which a teenage girl is living on the street, in a park or other outdoor environment, or in housing that is unstable, unsafe or otherwise inadequate. The United Nations explains that the right to adequate housing is not simply a roof over one's head "*rather it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity.*"² The right to live in security and dignity is especially important in light of the fact that teenage girls who are homeless are constantly subject to violence and degrading conditions of living (including living in appalling conditions in rooming houses in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver).

Most of the girls interviewed by Justice for Girls during the Housing Strategy project became homeless (left or were made to leave their family home, foster home or group home) between the ages of 12 and 14, with almost all becoming homeless before age 16.

Consequences of Girl Homelessness

It is widely accepted that homelessness is a key factor in young women's vulnerability to various forms of victimization. Once they are on the street, girls experience staggering levels of violence, from assaults by passers-by, abuse through prostitution, rape and assault by boyfriends and male street "brothers," extreme mental and

¹ McCreary Centre Society. *Against the Odds: A Profile of Marginalized and Street-Involved Youth in BC*. Vancouver, BC. 2007. http://www.mcs.bc.ca/pdf/Against_the_odds_2007_web.pdf

² Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. General Comment Number 4, Article 11(1) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. 1991.

physical cruelty by pimps and drug dealers, to sexual harassment and assault by private security and police.

When girls lack a safe home environment and governments fail to provide support and safe accessible housing for them, older exploitive men step in. Girls who are homeless “trade” sex with older men in exchange for a place to stay. Teenage girls on adult income assistance often end up living with older men because income assistance does not provide enough funds for them to rent housing on their own. During Housing Strategy interviews many girls described situations in which they were 14 or 15 and met a “boyfriend” in his 20s–30s (and sometimes much older) and began living with him because they did not have a place to stay.

Lack of girls’ transition houses across Canada

There is a serious lack of transition housing for teenage girls who are homeless and escaping male violence across Canada. While there are youth shelters and safe houses in some parts of Canada (mainly in cities), these are usually co-educational and often do not meet the specific needs of girls who are escaping violence and other oppression. Girls are subjected to harassment and further violence from male peers and male staff within youth safe houses/shelters and in youth homelessness programs. A recent federally funded national study found that young women are reluctant to make use of co-ed services for street youth due to “fears of intimidation and violence by male patrons.”³ During Housing Strategy interviews when we asked young women about staying in youth safe houses they commented,

You do get hit on a lot, but that’s pretty much everywhere you go right?

It’s pretty dangerous if you’re a girl.

In a recent BC government review of youth safe houses, the need for safety was a prevailing issue raised by past and present residents. Notably, the review mentioned a specific incident of violence involving “threats to a female resident’s safety when a male co-resident tried to climb into her room through the window.”⁴

The establishment of “girl-only” shelters and services is a chief recommendation of many Canadian studies examining violence prevention and services for young female survivors of sexual assault.

Little access to long term subsidized housing

National and international researchers maintain that youth homelessness is a growing problem partly because so little affordable housing is accessible to young people. The chronological waiting system for subsidized housing in effect bars those at high risk of homelessness, young mothers and recently arrived immigrant women in particular, from access to affordable housing. Young moms and recent immigrant women must survive years of living in substandard housing or homelessness before they reach the top of the subsidized housing wait list. Therefore, many homeless teenage girls live

³ Canadian Housing and Renewal Association. *On Her Own: Young Women and Homelessness in Canada*. Ottawa, ON. March 2002. p.52.

⁴ Olive Branch Consulting. *Review of Youth Safe Houses and Emergency Shelters in BC*. Vancouver, BC. 2005.

with older exploitative males, abusive boyfriends, unsafe roommates, and in deplorable rooming houses because they cannot afford to live alone in decent housing.

United Nations' Direction

At its 5th review of Canada's compliance with the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2006, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights concluded the following,

*The Committee recommends that [Canada] give special attention to the difficulties faced by homeless girls who are more vulnerable to health risks and social and economic deprivation, and take all necessary measures to provide them with adequate housing and social and health services.*⁵

Furthermore, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women recommends that governments "give explicit attention to the girl child in budget processes at all levels, including resource allocation and expenditure reviews."⁶

Key Recommendation

The federal government must allocate specific proportionate funding within anti-homelessness and other federal housing initiatives to housing options and support/prevention programs for homeless girls. Given that a significant number of the homeless in Canada are teenage girls (between 6-12% of the homeless in large Canadian cities are teenage girls⁷) a minimum of 6% of federal funding for anti-homelessness initiatives should be allocated specifically to programs tackling girl homelessness. Alternately, any future federal anti-homelessness funding programs designated for youth homelessness prevention must allocate a significant percentage of funding towards housing and support programs for homeless teenage girls.

⁵ United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Concluding Recommendations to Canada at its 5th Review of Compliance.

<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G06/427/83/PDF/G0642783.pdf?OpenElement>

⁶ United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Agreed Conclusions Report at the 51st Session (2007).

Recommendation 13 (I).

⁷ Justice for Girls (A. Czapska, A. Webb, N. Taefi) *More than Bricks and Mortar: A Rights Based Strategy to Prevent Girl Homelessness in Canada*, 2008. p.10.

http://www.justiceforgirls.org/publications/pdfs/jfg_housing_web.pdf