

Girl Homelessness in Canada
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Justice for Girls is a Canadian non-profit organization that promotes equality, justice and support for teenage girls living in poverty. Our understanding and approach to girls' conflict with the law begins with the premise that inequality and violence are pervasive and severe in the lives of young women who live in poverty.

Homelessness has been identified as a significant problem in Canada. Teenage girls make up between 6 and 12 percent of all homeless people in the country.¹ Homeless girls endure frequent and severe male sexual and physical violence, grossly inadequate and dangerous housing conditions, criminalization, serious and sometimes fatal health disorders, and many other devastating consequences.²

Teenage girls are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Marginalised within the category of children as females, and within the category of women as minors, young women, and the issues that affect them, are often eclipsed by larger concerns general to youth or women. Additionally, the intersections of discrimination that girls experience - such as homophobia, racism, colonization and poverty - exacerbate the disparities already experienced by girls as a result of their age and gender.

Aboriginal girls in Canada are disproportionately represented amongst homeless girls. Young Aboriginal women face multiple and extreme oppression through colonization, male violence, racism, poverty and institutionalization. These compounding oppressions make Aboriginal girls especially vulnerable to becoming homeless. The rate of physical and sexual abuse of young Aboriginal women is extremely high.³ In a recent Vancouver study, 42 percent of homeless girls were found to be of Aboriginal descent, 84 percent of which had experienced sexual abuse at some point during their lives.⁴

¹Based on compilations of statistics from cities across Canada found in the *On Her Own: Young Women and Homelessness in Canada* report and Canadian government estimates that youth constitute 10-30 percent of the total homeless population in big cities (The National Homelessness Initiative at http://www11.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/pls/edd/SPAH203_03_343004.htm) Within the Lower Mainland, 12% of the homeless are teenage girls. This percentage is based on a compilation of statistics, as following: The 2002 Research Project on Homelessness in the Greater Vancouver Regional District found that youth make up about 23-28% of the homeless in the GVRD. According to studies such as No Place to Call Home: A Profile of Street Youth in BC-2001, Between the Cracks: Homeless Youth in Vancouver 2002, and according to the 2003/04 Vancouver Underage Safe House statistics, girls make up about 42-53% of the youth homeless in the GVRD.

² S. Novac, L. Serge, M. Eberle and J. Brown, "*On her Own: Young Women and Homelessness in Canada*", (2002), Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, online: Status of Women Canada <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/pubs/pubspr/0662318986/200303_0662318986_e.pdf> (date accessed: 5 June 2005).

³ Ibid.

⁴ McCreary Centre Society, "*Between the cracks: homeless youth in Vancouver*" (2002), The McCreary Centre Society, Burnaby BC, online: The Homelessness Research Virtual Library <<http://www.hvl.ihpr.ubc.ca/pdf/McCreary2002.pdf>> (date accessed: 18 July 2005).

As in Australia, the systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families is part of a current and historic colonization of Aboriginal people in Canada. It is currently estimated that approximately 30 to 40 percent of children in the care of the state are of Aboriginal descent.⁵ Many Aboriginal girls leave alienating, sometimes racist, non-Aboriginal foster placements and other highly inappropriate child-welfare placements and become homeless.

Sexual abuse in particular has been named as a major cause of homelessness among young women. Sexual abuse is one of the only topics in youth homelessness studies that is “gendered” or spoken of in terms of gender. In a 2001 survey of 523 homeless youth aged 12 to 19, it was found that 87 percent of the homeless girls had been physically or sexually abused.⁶

The failure of the State to adequately house and support teenage girls who are on their own often forces girls to live with men who are violent and exploitative.⁷ One young Aboriginal woman described to us how after pulling her out of her home at age 12, when she requested help from the children’s ministry at 17 the ministry told her she was too old to be provided with services. She became involved in prostitution to survive,

I mean older men that seemed to be established or whatever, and them offering me a place to stay...this is how I could put food in my mouth and find a place to stay...”

Over the past few years, Justice for Girls has taken several measures to address the problem of girl homelessness. One of these has been participation in the United Nations Treaty reporting process. We believe that the answer to preventing girls from becoming homeless lies not only in short term safe houses for girls, but in the promotion, enforcement and realization of girls’ rights. The UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) asserts that the right to housing “should not be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense... Rather it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity.”⁸ Additionally, the *International Convention on the Rights of the Child* asserts that every child has the right to “a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.”⁹ Accordingly, Article 11 must be read as referring not only to housing in general but to *adequate* housing. This housing must be specifically tailored to girls’ needs and be interpreted in a way that addresses the realities of their lives. In particular, it must take into account health and well being, education, freedom from violence and attainment of equality and human rights.

⁵ Children in Care in Canada 2003 report by the Child Welfare League of Canada

⁶ No Place to Call Home report at <http://www.ihpr.ubc.ca/media/McCreary2001.pdf>

⁷ Marge Reisma-Street, “*Stories, Statistics, and Services on Youth and Housing in BC’s capital Region*” (2001), The Youth and Society Research Group University of Victoria, Victoria, BC.

⁸ General Comment of the Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights N° 4, 13/12/91, The right to adequate housing (Art.11 (1))

⁹ Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, 1577 UNTS 3, 28 ILM 1456 (entered into force 2 September 1990) [CRC], Article 27.

In May of 2006, Justice for Girls compiled a submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights during its 4th & 5th periodic review of Canada's compliance with the ICESCR. The Committee responded by recommending that the government of 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."¹⁰ Although no remedial measures have been taken by the government of Canada as of yet, we view this comment as the first step in the recognition of homeless teenage girls as a distinct group with specific needs.

Justice for Girls began the Housing Strategy Project in 2004, a three-year project, to identify the pathways, effects, and solutions to girl homelessness. This strategy goes beyond the 'bricks and mortar' approach to ending homelessness and instead focuses on how to ensure an adequate standard of living is a reality in girls' lives. *The Rights Based Strategy to Ending Girl Homelessness* is the culmination of the 3 year Housing Strategy Project. It includes all that we have learned about girl homelessness and girls' rights. It is also a description of how to prevent girls from becoming homeless and ensuring girls are housed in safety by promoting the realization of girls' basic human rights. Ultimately, we hope that rights-based strategies to ending girl homelessness will be started in other communities, will be taken on by the feminist movement and other community based advocates, and that girls' human rights will become a reality.

Key Recommendations which have emerged from the Strategy include:

- **A national anti-poverty strategy that features a plan for stopping girl homelessness and allocates funds for this purpose**

In order for young women to truly transition from poverty, homelessness, and a life of instability and male violence, a continuum of housing options that address girls' specific and diverse needs is essential. To date, Canada does not have a strategic and coordinated provincial/territorial or national approach to housing homeless girls nor any national anti-homelessness strategy.

Funds need to be earmarked specifically for tackling girl homelessness. Given that between 6 to 12 percent of the homeless in large cities across Canada are teenage girls, a minimum of 6 percent of federal funding for anti-homelessness initiatives should be allocated to programs to end girl homelessness (including funding for emergency and subsidized housing).

- **Feminist Foster Moms Project**

Girls who are taken into the care of the government need safe, supportive, foster homes that understand their lived realities of male violence. One way to support

¹⁰ United Nations. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Concluding observations of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights : Canada 19/05/2006. [E/C.12/CAN/CO/5/CRP.1]. New York: United Nations, 2006, [57], online: Economic and Social Council <<http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/docs/E.C.12.CAN.CO.5.pdf>> (date accessed: 5 January 2006).

girls and prevent them from becoming homeless is provide them with foster homes that are girl and woman only, and therefore safer than mixed gender homes. Foster homes should also be an environment in which young women's relationships with their mothers and other family is encouraged (if the young woman chooses). Girls often leave foster homes because they do not receive the support they require, do not feel safe, or feel alienated. This is particularly prevalent among First Nations girls who placed with non First Nations foster families. In order to remedy these problems, community groups - including girls' and women's rights groups - must take on the challenge of recruiting feminist foster moms, creating networks of feminist foster mothers, and eventually providing training and support to this network.

- **Detox and Treatment for girls**

Girl-only detox and treatment programs, which respond to the multiple issues girls face, are critical for girls who are homeless and addicted. We cannot stress enough how important voluntary detox and treatment programs are to helping girls be safe and healthy. These treatment programs should be voluntary and provided by community and health agencies.

- **Women's groups must be active in the fight for girls' rights.**

It is necessary for women's groups to take an active role in advocating for the rights of girls in all institutions, especially in an effort to prevent girls from becoming homeless. We believe that women's groups, because of their understanding of violence against women and women's rights are best situated to advocate for girls' rights. We must stand *with* young women, to help them access resources and advocate for the enforcement of their rights.

We conclude with this truism: *"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."*¹¹ We hope that the methods we used to plan our housing strategy will be a roadmap for other organizations who want to stop girl homelessness in their own communities. If you wish to receive more information, or a copy of our "Rights Based Strategy to Preventing Girl Homelessness", please do not hesitate to contact us at: justiceforgirls@justiceforgirls.org

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You can find Parity Magazine at <http://www.chp.org.au/parity/>

¹¹ Aboriginal Rights Group, Queensland, circa 1970.