

Creating a Safer Shelter System for FTMs in Toronto

What you need to know

Shelters are mainly separated based on the sex that one was born (female or male), making it extremely difficult and unsafe for many FTMs to navigate and find refuge in. Men's shelter providers have described being unable to safely serve FTMs and women's shelters have been viewed as an inappropriate alternative, leaving FTMs with no safe place to turn for shelter.

What is this research about?

Female-to-Male (FTM) transgender/transsexual people who are homeless have unique needs in the shelter system. Although the City of Toronto has recognized that significant barriers and challenges exist for both female-to-male and male-to-female transgender/transsexual people in the shelter system, there is still minimal support available for this population. FTMs describe being unsafe in men's shelters and unwelcome in

women's. Therefore, the 519 Community Centre partnered with stakeholders to form the FTM Safer Shelter Project. This research project investigated the issues of homelessness and shelter access for FTMs in Toronto. The aim of this study was to greatly improve issues



of access to the shelter system for FTMs.

ARTICLE SOURCE

The article *Invisible Men: FTMs and Homelessness in Toronto* was published by the Wellesley Institute in 2008.

KEYWORDS

Shelters, Female-to-Male (FTM) transgender/transsexual people, service barriers

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What did the researchers do?

The researchers conducted 18 one-on-one interviews with FTMs who had experienced homelessness or were at risk of becoming homeless and 20 one-on-one interviews with service providers including frontline staff and managers in the shelter system. The lead researchers and research assistants all identified as members of Toronto's FTM community and shared the goal of working towards building community through this research.

What did the researchers find?

Amongst the many findings which emerged from this study, included were:

- **Factors that contributed to homelessness for many FTMs included:** loss of family at a young age; histories of abuse and violence; mental health issues; discrimination, marginalization, and transphobia.
- The majority of FTM respondents stated that **they avoid the shelter system** and choose to sleep outside, couch surf, or use drop-ins.
- FTMs expressed **fears of violence when staying in men's shelters and fears that their male identity and personal dignity would be judged and ridiculed in women's shelters.**
- Service providers highlighted the **lack of trans-appropriate resources** and have stated that political frameworks and religious affiliations have been used to justify transphobic behaviours.
- Service providers also commented on the **hostility targeted at FTMs in women's shelters** by non-trans residents.
- Service providers discussed the **lack of policy expectations** from the City of Toronto and the need for ongoing staff training on FTM issues.

Based on the findings, the researchers developed a concrete list of recommendations regarding safe shelter access for FTMs. Several key recommendations included:

- The City of Toronto must **develop and appropriately fund specialized shelter programs to allocate beds for FTMs** and other vulnerable homeless men who are at severe risk of violence in order to meet their shelter and housing support needs
- The City must **undertake an anti-violence campaign** in all shelters with a specific focus on men's shelters.
- The city must **foster and mobilize the expertise that exists within the women's shelters that are effectively working with trans clients.**
- Shelter providers must **immediately stop transphobia from occurring** in the shelter system.
- Ontario must implement **strategies for reducing service barriers for transgender/transsexual people.**

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Although this study complements an earlier piece of research on access to/use of shelters in the city and the needs of trans communities, little research has investigated the issues and barriers that trans people face in the shelter system. This research is crucial in beginning the process of creating a safer and more accessible shelter system for FTMs. Shelter providers can also use this research to establish clear anti-discrimination policies and provide direction to staff on how to address transphobia. The City of Toronto can use this research as concrete evidence that FTMs face huge amounts of discrimination and are unsafe in the current shelter system and to therefore, take the appropriate steps in making it a safer and more accessible place for FTMs.