

May 8, 2007

Wellesley Institute backgrounder:

Physical and sexual violence rates for homeless many times higher than housed

The murder of Bly “California” Markis in late April has focused attention on the violence that people who are homeless suffer on the streets.

Memorial service for Bly Markis

May 10 * 3 p.m. * The Sanctuary, 25 Charles Street East, Toronto

Summary: The lives of the homeless “nasty, brutish and short”

People who are homeless face high rates of physical and sexual violence, according to research from Toronto, Canada, the United States and Europe. A review by the Wellesley Institute shows that:

- Homeless people in Toronto report a **rate of physical assaults 35 times higher** than the housed population; and a sexual assault rate that is also many times higher than those who are housed.
- In addition to physical and sexual violence, people who are homeless suffer **serious illness and premature death** at a rate many times higher than the housed population.
- Physical and sexual violence is a **leading cause of homelessness**, especially for women and youth. Women who are victims of violence are **more likely to experience discrimination** from landlords.
- People who are homeless report a high rate of assaults by police. This has led to a **low-level of trust** with police and a reluctance to report incidents or seek police help in violent encounters.
- **Safe and affordable housing** offers the best security for homeless people, and **safe shelters** are also critically important, yet housing and shelters are in short supply in Toronto.
- A U.S. legislative initiative calls for violence against homeless people to be **prosecuted as hate crimes**. Canada’s hate crimes law doesn’t mention the homeless, but it can be “read in”.

Physical / sexual violence: Staggeringly high among the homeless

The murder of **Bly Markis**, 33, is the latest in a series of murders, deaths and assaults against women and men who are homeless. Other recent homeless deaths in Toronto include:

- **Paul Croutch**, 59, beaten to death in Moss Park in August of 2005. Three reservists with the Queen’s Own Rifles have been charged with second degree murder. The case is before the courts.
- **Michael Tilley**, 44, beaten to death while panhandling on Thanksgiving Day, 2000.
- **Adrian “Santa Claus” Fillmore**, 50, died after his throat was slashed in June, 2000.
- **John Albert Currie**, 49, beaten to death in May, 2000.

Homeless people are 35 times more likely to be the victims of physical assaults than Torontonians who are housed, according to a soon-to-be-released survey of the health of homeless people¹. The 2007 Street Health survey reports that 35% of homeless people reported being physically assaulted in the past year. Less than one percent of housed Torontonians report a physical assault². Two-thirds of the homeless people who were assaulted said that they were beaten more than once in the past year. The 2007 numbers are consistent with the previous Street Health survey of Toronto's homeless, in 1992, which reported that 40.4% of homeless people had been assaulted³. An 18-month clinical review of 561 homeless people in Toronto by the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry completed in 1997 confirmed a high rate of physical and sexual abuse for women and men⁴. A 2004 survey of homeless men by Dr. Stephen Hwang reported that 36% of homeless shelter users and 50% of street dwellers had been assaulted in the past year⁵.

Major research funded by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2005 found that “homeless women are far more likely to experience violence of all sorts than American women in general, by differentials ranging from two to four depending on the specific type of violence in question”⁶. A six-year study on family homelessness and poverty in Massachusetts by the National Center on Family Homelessness concluded: “Violence is pervasive in the lives of homeless women. A staggering 92% of homeless women experience severe physical and/or sexual assault at some point in their lives”⁷.

International report: U.S., U.K., Denmark

The U.S. National Coalition for the Homeless publishes an annual report on hate crimes and violence against people who are homeless⁸. From the introduction:

In 2006, homeless individuals in America faced another year of brutality that ranged from assault to killings. Sadly, these gruesome accounts are just a few of many that demonstrate the hate/violence faced by people experiencing homelessness each year. The following report documents 142 hate crimes and violent acts that occurred in 2006, collected from newspapers and reports across the country. The narratives bring to light the discrimination and senseless violence faced daily by so many of our country's homeless citizens. Here are just a few illustrative cases:

- *In February, a 62-year old homeless woman from San Antonio, Texas was severely beaten around 1 a.m. by a man with a tire iron. The beating came after this woman rejected his demands for sex. Despite her serious injuries, she was able to walk to a convenience store and get help. A responding officer described her face as being “pulverized”.*
- *Last March in Orlando, a homeless man named August Felix, 54, was found having been severely kicked, punched and beaten with an unknown blunt object. Felix was living near the railroad tracks when a group of teenagers attacked him for fun. Other homeless individuals were targeted, but Felix was the only resultant death.*
- *In August, Tara Cole, a 32-year old homeless woman from Nashville, Tennessee, was pushed off the dock where she slept every night into the nearby river. Cole's body was recovered from the river on August 21, ten days after her murder.*

In the United Kingdom, research by the Mannheim Centre for Criminology and Crisis found that “single homeless people are a population experiencing extreme and unacceptable levels of violence and victimization, often perpetrated by members of the public”⁹. This study reported:

While crime levels are dropping across the UK, for homeless people the rates are staggering:

- *20% of homeless people suffered a burglary, whilst the British Crime Survey reported that*
- *3.2% of all households in England and Wales had done so*

- 67% of the homeless had suffered a theft, whilst 1.4% of all adults in England and Wales had done so.
- 43% of the homeless had experienced damage to property, whilst 7% of all households had done so
- Just over half of the sample, 52% had experienced violence in the past year, in contrast to 4% of the general population
- 8% of the homeless had been sexually assaulted, but the British Crime Survey had encountered too few cases 'to count.'

In Copenhagen, a survey of homeless people by projekt UDENFOR found equally high results regarding violence¹⁰. Among other findings, the Danish study reports:

16 informants, i.e. about one third of the group of informants, have experienced physical violence, e.g. being beaten, being urinated and/or spit on, while sleeping/lying down. The fact that these 16 informants have been sleeping/lying down indicates that the violence has been unmotivated.

Homelessness leads to greater illness and premature death

In addition to being victims of specific incidents of physical and sexual violence, people who are homeless face a higher level of serious illness and early death. Toronto Dr. Stephen Hwang is a leading authority on morbidity (illness) and mortality (death) among the homeless. His 2000 research found that young homeless men in Toronto were dying at a rate more than eight times higher than those who are housed. The death rate for middle-aged and older homeless men was two to three times higher than similar-aged men who were housed¹¹. Dr. Hwang noted:

Homeless persons suffer from a high prevalence of physical disease, mental illness, and substance abuse. Homelessness is associated with exposure to the elements and an increased risk of infections such as tuberculosis and human immunodeficiency virus disease. Among the homeless, access to health care is often suboptimal. Homeless persons also experience severe poverty and often come from disadvantaged minority communities, factors that are independently associated with poor health. The finding that mortality among homeless persons is much higher than among their counterparts in the general population is therefore not surprising.

Four years later, Dr. Hwang published the results of research on early death among women¹²:

Homeless women 18–44 years of age were 10 times more likely to die than women in the general population of Toronto. In studies from a total of 7 cities, the risk of death among homeless women was greater than that among women in the general population by a factor of 4.6 to 31.2 in the younger age group and 1.0 to 2.0 in the older age group. . . Excess mortality is far greater among homeless women under age 45 years than among older homeless women. Mortality rates among younger homeless women often approach or equal those of younger homeless men. In the general population, young women have a much lower risk of dying and a longer life expectancy than young men have... The effects of poverty do not reverse this trend; in fact, the difference in life expectancy between women and men is more pronounced among those of low socioeconomic status. In the homeless population, however, the mortality rate among younger women was similar to that among their male counterparts, which indicates that the adverse health effects of the social environment and health behaviours of younger homeless women must be particularly severe.

Violence generates homelessness

Physical and sexual violence is a leading cause of homelessness. The Clarke study of homeless people in Toronto reported that almost one-in-three people in their sample group became homeless in order to flee from physical or sexual assault. The U.S. National Family Center on Family Homelessness six-year research project noted the cascading effect of spousal and family violence: The immediate effects of physical and sexual violence is physical injury, followed by severe emotional consequences (39% of homeless women who have been abused reported post-traumatic stress disorder and 47% had a major depressive disorder); suicide and attempted suicide, along with severe disruption in education, training and employment were also reported in high numbers; plus, of course, homelessness.

Women who are the victims of violence also face significant discrimination by landlords when they try to find a home. A July 2006 research study funded by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation found that landlords actively discriminate against battered women¹³. One of the many disturbing findings: “A substantial number of landlords were surprisingly candid in their unwillingness to rent to a battered woman and some were even openly hostile towards battered women”.

Homeless people and the police: Even more violence

The preliminary findings of the Street Health survey show that 12% of homeless people reported being assaulted by police officers – that’s up from the 10% in 1992. Fully half of those who reported an attack by police said that they were assaulted more than once by police – also up from 35.6% in 1992. In 2004, Dr. Stephen Hwang reported on the results of a study of 160 homeless people in Toronto: 9% of homeless shelter users reported being assaulted by police in the past year; 8% of homeless people sleeping on the streets reported an assault by police¹⁴.

Homeless people have plenty of interaction with police, and much of it is negative, according to Dr. Hwang. This leads to a low level of trust and leaves many homeless people unwilling to call the police for help when they need it. He notes:

Homeless people, like injection drug users, are a vulnerable and marginalized urban population at high risk of morbidity and mortality... In both Canada and the United States, homeless people have high arrest rates, and although some arrests involve serious charges, homeless people are often charged with minor offenses such as petty theft or entry into vacant buildings. Some interactions with police may also be related to prohibitions against loitering, camping, and panhandling. The manner in which police and paramedics treat homeless people is ... an important issue. In addition to affecting homeless people’s trust and willingness to seek assistance, these interactions can also have a direct impact on their physical well-being. News accounts have described incidents in which police officers in various Canadian and US cities reportedly used unjustified and excessive force against homeless people. In some of these cases, the fact that the individual was homeless appeared to be a factor contributing to their victimization... Our study documents that homeless people in Toronto have a much lower level of trust in police than in paramedics, and about 9% reported having been assaulted by police in the last 12 months. Homeless people’s perceptions of the police may pose a barrier that prevents them from seeking needed care in an emergency. Our findings also highlight the need for independent investigation of homeless people’s reports of victimization by police.

Practical solutions: Safe shelters and safe housing

The major U.S. study on violence and homeless women concludes: “One reason why the experience of violence is so common among homeless women is that their routine day-to-day activities expose them

to potential offenders but do not provide them with capable guardians. Sleeping patterns and routines are strongly related to victimization risks”¹⁵. Without a safe shelter to spend the night, or safe, affordable and appropriate housing over the long-term, people who are homeless will continue to be vulnerable to acts of physical and sexual violence.

Toronto’s *homeless shelters are crowded and set to get worse*. Hostels had 1,403,881 bed-nights in 2005 (number of occupied beds throughout the year), up from 1,363,593 in 1998. The occupancy rate in shelters was consistently above 90% in the latter part of 2006, especially in shelters for women and in co-ed shelters (90% is the mark established by Toronto City Council that is supposed to trigger the opening of new shelter beds). The number of families in city shelters, after falling to 700 people in 2005, has increased by almost 25% in the past year¹⁶. Toronto’s 2007 municipal operating budget called for a further 3.5% cut in shelter beds¹⁷. In addition to the official shelter cuts in Toronto’s budget, street nurse Cathy Crowe has added up the loss, or anticipated loss, of another 407 shelter beds, up to 200 day shelter spaces and 18 supportive housing units¹⁸.

Toronto has had *few new truly affordable homes in recent years* and only a handful are on the development horizon. No new affordable homes were built in 23 of the city’s 44 municipal wards in the five years up to 2006. Only 1,435 “affordable” homes were built in the remaining wards in that time, but most of them were set at or close to average market rents – which are not truly affordable to low or moderate-income renter households. Of those new homes, just 613 received a subsidy to make them truly affordable to lower-income households¹⁹.

Before federal and provincial housing funding and program cuts in the early 1990s, senior levels of government were funding an average of 2,100 new co-op and non-profit homes in Toronto annually²⁰. If those governments had simply maintained previous levels of funding, Toronto would have more than 25,000 new truly affordable homes for low, moderate and middle-income households over the past decade. Toronto’s 2007 Operating Budget calls for 863 new affordable homes to be developed this year, but 339 of those homes were in last year’s budget and never developed²¹. That leaves a net of 524 new homes in the budget for this year. In the March provincial budget, a total of \$26.7 in federal housing dollars was allocated to Toronto²².

Legislative action: Prosecuting attacks as hate crimes

On April 27, 2007, the Florida House of Representatives unanimously passed HB11 (Assault and Battery on Homeless Persons), sponsored by Representative Priscilla Taylor (D-West Palm Beach). “Florida is considered the meanest state, leading the nation in the number of violent acts against homeless persons,” said Rep. Taylor. The bill amends Florida hate crimes laws to include the homeless status of a victim. Violent crimes with evidence of prejudice based on the person’s status would be prosecuted as a hate crime and subject to increased penalties. The bill is before the Florida Senate for consideration²³. The U.S. National Coalition for the Homeless is working with U.S. Congressional Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-Texas) to introduce similar legislation at the national level²⁴.

Canada’s Criminal Code includes a hate crimes section:

718.2 A court that imposes a sentence shall also take into consideration the following principles:

(a) a sentence should be increased or reduced to account for any relevant aggravating or mitigating circumstances relating to the offence or the offender, and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing,

(i) evidence that the offence was motivated by bias, prejudice or hate based on race, national or ethnic origin, language, colour, religion, sex, age, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, or any other similar factor,

The hate crimes section was amended recently to add “any other similar factor”. While the homeless status of a victim is not an identified group in section 718.2, legal experts have suggested that homelessness could be “read into” the hate crimes provisions as it was clearly the intention of legislators to keep the list of identified groups open – rather than restricting it to the specific groups that are mentioned. Provincial governments, which are responsible for prosecuting offences under the Criminal Code, assign a case to be prosecuted as a hate crime based on the evidence. There is no record of violence against homeless people being prosecuted as a hate crime in Canada, which suggests that a U.S.-style legislative initiative – which specifically names homelessness – may be required.

For information:

- The **Wellesley Institute**’s housing and homelessness section:
<http://wellesleyinstitute.com/public-policy/issue-pages/issue-page-housing-and-homelessness/>
- The University of Toronto’s **Centre for Urban and Community Studies**:
<http://www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca/>
- The U.S. **National Coalition for the Homeless**:
<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/>

The Wellesley Institute’s **Blueprint to End Homelessness in Toronto** is a practical and cost-effective plan that sets realistic targets. It calls on senior levels of government to assume their fair share of responsibility for housing and homelessness initiatives.



¹ Preliminary statistics, 2007 Street Health Survey (to be released in the fall of 2007)

² Toronto Police Services Annual Statistical Report, 2005

³ The Street Health Report, 1992

⁴ Mental Illness and Pathways into Homelessness, Clarke Institute of Psychiatry (now part of the Centres for Addiction and Mental Health), November 3, 1997, conference proceedings

⁵ Homeless People’s Trust and Interactions with Police and Paramedics, Journal of Urban Health, Vol. 81, No. 4

⁶ The Experience of Violence in the Lives of Homeless Women: A Research Report, November 2005

⁷ Violence in the Lives of Homeless Women, 2001

⁸ Hate, Violence, and Death on Main Street USA, National Coalition for the Homeless, February 2007

⁹ Living in Fear, Crisis UK, June 2005

¹⁰ Vold mod hjemløse, projekt UDENFOR, April 2007

¹¹ Hwang, Stephen W., Mortality Among Men Using Homeless Shelters in Toronto, Ontario, Journal of the American Medical Association, Vol. 283, No. 16

¹² Cheung, Angela and Hwang, Stephen, Risk of Death Among Homeless Women, Canadian Medical Association Journal, Vol. 170, No. 8

¹³ Housing Discrimination Against Victims of Domestic Violence, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2006

¹⁴ Homeless People’s Trust and Interactions with Police and Paramedics, Journal of Urban Health, Vol. 81, No. 4

¹⁵ The Experience of Violence in the Lives of Homeless Women: A Research Report, November 2005

¹⁶ Shelter statistics from Toronto Shelter, Support and Housing Administration

¹⁷ Toronto Operating Budget 2007, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration

¹⁸ Cathy Crowe Newsletter #31, February 2007

¹⁹ Status of Affordable Housing and Shelter Initiatives, Toronto Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, 2006

²⁰ Where’s Home? A Picture of Housing Needs in Ontario, 1999

²¹ Toronto Operating Budget 2007, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration

²² Ontario Budget 2007

²³ U.S. National Coalition for the Homeless Media Release, April 2007

²⁴ U.S. National Coalition for the Homeless Legislative Action Alert, April 2007