

UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN A NORTHERN COMMUNITY—TIMMINS, ONTARIO

PERSPECTIVES OF HOMELESS PARENTS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS ON FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

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Presented to
Homelessness Partnering Strategy
Employment and Social Development Canada

Canada

December 31, 2013

POVERTÉ, SANS-ABRISME ET MIGRATION
POVERTY, HOMELESSNESS AND MIGRATION
PAUVRETÉ, SANS-ABRISME ET MIGRATION

APPENDIX D

REPORTS 4 & 5 QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

**Interviews and Focus Groups
with Homeless Parents and Service Providers:**

**Perspectives Of Homeless Parents And Service Providers
On Family Homelessness**

POVERTY HOMELESSNESS AND MIGRATION
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Poverty, Homelessness and Migration
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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the *Poverty, Homelessness and Migration (PHM)* project conducted a period prevalence count of homeless persons in Timmins, a city of over 43,000 people situated in northeastern Ontario. The findings were startling: families made up one-third of the absolutely homeless population within the city (Kauppi, Pallard, Lemeiux, & Matukala Nkosi, 2012). Community partners and social service agency representatives expressed grave concerns about the rising trend of family homelessness and identified a need for in-depth research in this area in order to devise long-term sustainable policy and program solutions, to prevent family homelessness, and to mitigate its adverse impacts on individuals, families and the larger community in the city of Timmins.

Our previous quantitative research had indicated that, in Timmins, homeless parents or guardians were predominantly women with dependent children. A small percentage of homeless parents or guardians were men with custody of children. Indigenous parents or guardians were overrepresented among homeless families. Moreover, a majority of the Indigenous parents or guardians were women. These results aligned with the previous epidemiological and survey results which found that homeless families were primarily female-headed and from minority ethnic communities as compared to single homeless adults living without children (Bassuk et al., 1986; Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1998; Culhane, Metraux, Park, Schretzman & Valente, 2007; Rossi, 1994; Zoltnick et al., 2010).

The findings of our previous quantitative study suggest the need to design services for married/common-law couples as well as single parents or guardians with at least one dependent child. Moreover, the previous results point toward the need for research on male homeless parents or guardians in order to better understand the needs of homeless fathers.

A six-phase mixed-methods research study was designed in collaboration with community partners in order to better understand the nature, extent, and circumstances of family homelessness in Timmins. According to the 2011 census, its population is predominantly Anglophone and Francophone (Statistics Canada, 2014). Nevertheless, from 2001 to 2006, the Indigenous population increased by 14% (Carrière, 2011). The subgroup of people with First Nations heritage grew by 29%, while the Métis population grew by 2%. The 2011 census reported that Indigenous people comprise 8% of the population in Timmins (Statistics Canada, 2014).

The overrepresentation of Indigenous families among homeless people indicated the possible influence of major structural and societal forces, including discrimination and racism operating as precipitating factors for homelessness and near homelessness (Kauppi et al., 2012). Individual interviews with homeless Indigenous, Francophone and Anglophone

parents in Timmins can provide new information about the underlying issues regarding family homelessness and the structural barriers, including gaps in services, encountered by homeless parents.

Individual interviews with homeless Indigenous, Francophone and Anglophone parents in Timmins can provide new information about the underlying issues regarding family homelessness and the structural barriers, including gaps in services, encountered by homeless parents.

II. METHODOLOGY

Thirty Anglophone, Francophone and Indigenous parents participated in individual interviews.

The strategy for recruiting participants for individual interviews and focus groups built upon the relationships established with service providers in Timmins developed by conducting the survey. Many survey respondents assisted with the recruitment of families for interviews and focus groups and agreed to participate in these last phases of the study. The service providers who assisted with recruitment included food bank, clothing bank/household goods, soup kitchen, outreach and shelters, services for Indigenous people, services for people with intellectual difficulties, housing services, legal services, not-for profit groups working on issues of hunger and poverty, and women's services. Eleven agencies recruited families for interviews and/or participated in a focus group for service providers.

Bilingual research assistants were hired to conduct the research, given the presence of Anglophones and Francophones in Timmins. The team also included a Cree research assistant who was originally from the James Bay region.

Thirty Anglophone, Francophone and Indigenous parents participated in individual interviews¹. The recruitment of Indigenous parents for individual interviews proceeded as planned but more Indigenous parents responded to requests for interviews. Indeed 18 of the participants were Indigenous parents. Ten Indigenous mothers and eight Indigenous fathers were interviewed. However, challenges were encountered in recruiting Anglophone and Francophone parents for individual interviews; 7 Anglophone parents and 5 Francophone parents were interviewed. While efforts were made to recruit additional parents in these two groups, many individuals did not attend the scheduled interviews. The challenges included recruitment difficulties at Francophone agencies. Based on service provider reports, Francophone parents were "passing" as Anglophones and smaller numbers of homeless Francophone families were apparently accessing services in comparison with their numbers in the total population of Timmins. It became evident that parents/caregivers fear that self-identification as experiencing homelessness or the risk of homelessness can result in involvement of child welfare authorities and subsequent investigations of their circumstances. This factor appeared to serve as a deterrent among Anglophones and Francophones. The level of participation of Indigenous parents reflects their strong presence among those experiencing challenges related to living circumstances and housing, as well as the connections of these parents with service providers at agencies serving this subpopulation.

In addition, two focus groups were conducted with Anglophone, Francophone and Indigenous parents. Francophone and Anglophone parents participated together in the two discussion groups. These parents stated a preference for participating in English. Four focus groups were conducted with service providers within these socio-linguistic groups:

¹One additional interview with a mother could not be transcribed due to background noise on the recording combined with her quiet speaking voice.

focus groups were conducted separately with Anglophone, Francophone and Indigenous providers. A fourth focus group included a mix of service providers who provided services to these socio-cultural groups. Focus groups included three or more participants. The group conducted with Indigenous parents included 8 participants (7 mothers and 1 father).

A. Procedure

Service providers assisted with recruitment of parents for individual interviews and focus groups. The individual and group interviews took place within agency contexts.

Approval was received from the Research Ethics Board at Laurentian University. As noted above, service providers assisted with the recruitment of parents for individual interviews and focus groups. The individual and group interviews took place within agency contexts. Documents were available in English and French (i.e., information letter, consent form, demographic questionnaire, interview guide and debriefing questions), and the bilingual research assistants were prepared to conduct the interviews in the participants' language of choice. All sessions were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. A list of support services in Timmins was provided to each participant at the end of the session. Each participant was provided with \$20.00 for the reimbursement of any expenses of participation.

Within focus groups, participants were asked to sign confidentiality agreements at the beginning of the session which specified that they would maintain confidentiality and not disclose statements of other participants outside the group. However, the consent form stated that, while the researchers would keep information strictly confidential (within the legal limits of confidentiality), it was possible that other participants might not adhere to this standard. The audio recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim. In order to ensure confidentiality, the participants of interviews have been assigned pseudonyms. In reporting on the results of the interviews, the pseudonym, gender (M=man or W=woman) and socio-cultural group are provided (e.g. Ben, A-M indicates an Anglophone man, Dawna, I-F indicates an Indigenous woman and **Évonne**, F-W indicates a Francophone woman).

The questions for parents pertained to their housing situation and impacts on their children's lives, service use, needs and barriers to accessing services. The probing questions were flexible and enabled parents to express themselves in narrative form.

B. Instrument

An open-ended interview guide was used in both individual interviews with parents and focus group interviews with parents and service providers. The questions pertained to the housing situation and impacts on their children's lives, service use, needs and barriers to accessing services. The probing questions were flexible and enabled parents to express themselves in narrative form. Within focus groups, dialogue between participants was encouraged by the facilitator. In focus groups with service providers, the questions in the interview guide were similar to those posed to homeless parents, but they centred on the providers' experiences in working with homeless families.

All participants of individual and group interviews completed a background questionnaire which provided information on measures such as their gender, age, socio-cultural background, highest level of education, and agency where the interview was being conducted. Parents also provided information about the number and age of children, types of homelessness experienced and sources of income. Service providers gave information about the number of years of service to the agency and to families experiencing poverty and homelessness in addition to background information about their gender, age and linguistic and socio-cultural heritage.

C. Sample—Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups

1. Family Interviews

The 30 family participants included mothers/grandmothers/guardians (40%) and fathers/grandfathers/guardians (60%) who ranged in age from 19 to 71.

The 30 family participants included mothers/grandmothers/guardians (40%) and fathers/grandfathers/guardians (60%) who ranged in age from 19 to 71. A majority of the participants were Indigenous people (58%), while 23% were Anglophones and 19% were Francophones. Some Indigenous people self-identified as having mixed heritage (e.g., Francophone and Ojibway, or Cree and Ojibway). Most of the participants were single (55%). Slightly fewer participants were married or living in common law relationships (19%) than were divorced/separated or widowed (26%).

With regard to schooling, a majority of the women and men had not completed secondary school (61%) and 7% had a primary school education (no high school). The remainder had completed some community college courses (32%). None indicated completion of post-secondary education. Just over half of the participants (52%) were receiving benefits from Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP). A few had employment income (7%) while the remainder indicated that they had some income from other sources such as CPP, funding from a First Nation or other employment-related or government-related funds (e.g. WSIB, child tax credit, or other income tax credits).

Participants had been homeless from less than a month up to 22 years. Half of the participants were absolutely homeless (50%) while the remainder were precariously housed or at-risk of becoming homeless in the near future (e.g., were being evicted, could not afford to pay the rent, or were living in substandard housing circumstances). Participants had up to 11 children whom they identified as their biological offspring, and a few parents stated that they had stepchildren or foster children. None of the parents stated that they had adopted children. Two-thirds of the parents reported that they had one or two children. The age range of children was from zero (infancy) to young adulthood; however, those who were older adults/grandparent caregivers had adult children who were up to age 39. Most parents (89%) identified infants, toddlers, school-aged children or adolescents within their families, while 11% (n=3) mentioned adult children. The interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2013.

Participants had up to 11 children who they identified as their biological offspring, and a few parents stated that they had stepchildren or foster children.

2. Focus Groups

Six focus groups were conducted with service providers and parents; two groups were conducted with parents and four with service providers. A total of 23 Indigenous, Francophone and Anglophone women and men participated in the discussion groups during the summer and fall of 2013.

It became evident that parents/caregivers fear that self-identification as experiencing homelessness or the risk of homelessness can result in involvement of child welfare authorities and subsequent investigations of their circumstances.

a. Parents

The twelve participants in the family focus groups were ten women and two men. The participants were diverse and included Francophone, Anglophone and Indigenous people. They ranged in age between 20 and 47; however, only one participant was over 37 years of age. A majority were single (two-thirds, n=8) while a third were married or in a common-law relationship (n=4). Their backgrounds were similar to the participants of the individual interviews with parents in terms of the highest level of education (high school and some college schooling) and the receipt of financial support from Ontario Works or Ontario Disabilities Support Program. The participants had complex histories of homelessness that included experiences of varied forms of homelessness, including absolute homelessness and the risk of homelessness. The parents had up to four children and many had children in different age groups (i.e. childhood and adolescence). Those in the latter group spoke of long-term, even life-long, impacts of homelessness on family relationships.

Twenty three Indigenous, Francophone and Anglophone women and men participated in the discussion groups during the summer and fall of 2013.

b. Service providers

The eleven participants in four focus groups with service providers included nine women and two men—Indigenous, Anglophone and Francophone staff—who work with families experiencing homelessness. Three or four people participated in each discussion group. These participants had experience with varied services including shelter, food banks, services for Indigenous people and women’s crisis services; they included those who were engaged with front-line and administrative functions. The participants had been in their positions from some months up to nine years; all but one participant had between three to 25 years of experience in working with homeless individuals and families.

The eleven participants of four focus groups with service providers included nine women and two men—Indigenous, Anglophone and Francophone staff—who work with families experiencing homelessness.

III. FINDINGS

The analysis focused on describing the major issues found in the narratives of the participants of interviews and then examining the emergence of 38 dominant themes within the focus groups.

A. Approach to the Qualitative Analysis

Members of the research team conducted a qualitative, thematic analysis of the data to identify dominant themes (Creswell, 2014; Gibbs, 2008; Tesch, 1991), with emphasis on data-driven analysis and on the use of principles and practices of grounded theory methods, by engaging in open coding and selective coding (Liamputtong Rice & Ezzy, 2004). The analysis focused on describing the major issues found in the narratives of the participants in the interviews and then examining the emergence of 38 dominant themes within the focus groups. Three members of the research team conducted separate analyses of the transcripts to identify themes in the data. The themes and subthemes included reasons for homelessness, mental and physical health, cultural aspects, racism and discrimination, experiences with hidden and absolute homelessness as well as histories of homelessness, migration, barriers to services, benefits of services, impacts on families and resiliency (see Table A-1 in Appendix A).

The themes shown in Table A-1 include the numerous topics that emerged from the individual interviews. Given the large number of subthemes, the findings focus on the major and minor themes, with emphasis on those mentioned by a majority of parents. Thus, the section on findings discusses 14 dominant themes and 38 dominant sub-themes that resulted from the selective coding process. The themes are described in the results from the interviews with families and while the interview data from focus groups was examined to determine the consistency in the themes identified within the family interviews and focus groups in comparison with the service provider focus groups.

Tables 1 to 6 show the dominant themes emerging from the analysis and include the number of times each theme was mentioned by women and men and by all participants (i.e., frequency of mention). This analysis provides an indication of the relative importance of the theme to the mothers and fathers and to the participants as a whole. Some themes were particularly salient to Indigenous people in our study; we have described these findings in the section for Table 6. It is important to note that the frequency of response is, in a number of instances, linked to the number of respondents within a subgroup.

The following sections also include a description of the dominant themes and illustrations based on direct quotations. As noted above, when verbatim quotations are included, pseudonyms are used and notations to indicate gender (M=man, W=woman) and socio-cultural group (I=Indigenous, F=Francophone, A=Anglophone).

B. Findings from Individual Interviews with Parents

1. Homelessness

Participants' experiences of homelessness and explanations about aspects of homelessness emerged as a dominant theme.

The interviews included questions about the participants' experiences of homelessness and explanations about aspects of homelessness and this emerged as a dominant theme. Table 1 shows that the four minor themes pertained to reasons for homelessness, hidden homelessness, histories of homelessness and absolute homelessness. With regard to the reasons for homelessness, mothers and fathers made similar numbers of comments. In speaking about hidden homelessness, most comments were made by mothers.

a. Reasons for homelessness

Parents identified six issues that they cited as reasons for being homeless. These subthemes were housing issues, a lack of income, relationship issues, health or mental health, lack of education and aspects of the community of Timmins (see Table 1).

Housing issues. Housing and lack of income were the primary factors that were understood by parents as the causes of their homelessness. Mothers and fathers in all three socio-cultural groups commented on the unaffordability of rent. Évonne, Alain and Lisa noted the high cost of rental accommodation as a major barrier for families:

Ah oui, c'est cher pour nous autres, ah oui (Évonne, F, W).

Rents are very expensive here (Alain, F, M).

So people are living in bad places because they can't afford anything here (Lisa, I, W).

Other parents mentioned the need for more subsidized accommodation, an increase in the availability of "healthy housing", especially healthy, affordable housing for families, and a more effective process for ensuring that health inspectors to put pressure on landlords to address issues such as structural problems, heating, moisture, and the presence of mould, rodents, and insect infestations. Cate (I, W) summed up the need for better access to housing:

If they would build more housing, we'd be better off right? Everybody would have, like I said, the single parents would have more opportunity, better living arrangements of more affordable housing. You know, 'cause the rents are really, really high.

The unaffordability of housing in the rental market was linked to poverty and the lack of income. Mothers and fathers whose primary source of income was Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disabilities Support Program (ODSP) explained that there was a large gap between the amount of money they received and the cost of rent and other basic necessities. Luna (I, W), an adolescent mother, was facing eviction because of the unaffordability of her housing; she stated that her entire income was required to cover the cost of housing for her and her two young children. The participants also included parents who were struggling to survive through employment but, as part of the working poor, they could not afford to pay the rent along with

Parents identified six issues that they cited as reasons for being homeless. These subthemes were housing issues, a lack of income, relationship issues, health or mental health, lack of education and aspects of the community of Timmins

other basic needs. As a result of the inability to pay the rent, even in circumstances where the housing was substandard or overcrowded due to shared accommodation, families were living homeless or facing homelessness in the near future.

Table 1. Major theme 1: Explanations of homelessness

Minor theme	Subtheme	F	M	Total ^a
Reasons	Housing issues	48	73	121
	Lack of income	35	58	93
	Health or mental health issues	11	35	46
	Relationship issues	10	14	24
	Lack of education	9	6	15
	Community	3	14	17
	Subtotal	116	200	316
Hidden homelessness	Overcrowding & couch surfing	20	6	26
	Substandard housing	19	—	19
	Landlords	15	—	15
	Subtotal	54	6	60
Histories		9	19	28
Absolute homelessness		6	12	18
Total		185	237	422

^aNumbers reflect the frequency of mention.

Health or mental health. It is often difficult to determine whether physical or mental health challenges precede or follow experiences of homelessness. Parents spoke about the multiple stressors they experience in the struggle to find suitable housing. Many parents expressed similar views as Lorne (A, M):

There are a lot of places [where] one can't get housing, but in the lower income bracket, it's just not available. It's just not. And the waiting list—I have enquired about [it and it's] up to about anywhere from 2 to 7 years. That's a long time to wait, a long time, you know. And your quality of life suffers because of it, physical and mental life, you know.

For Lorne, physical and mental health challenges were ongoing and contributed to the lack of access to housing. Robert (A, M) was evicted by his landlord following a flood that ruined his basement apartment; the eviction took place on the same day that he was hospitalized for depression. Other parents spoke specifically about addictions—a mental health issue—that interfered with the ability to obtain housing.

Relationship issues. Some parents became homeless as a result of the dissolution of relationships (e.g., marital or common law), disagreements with close relatives who were key sources of support (e.g., parents), or due to illness or the death of a loved one. At times, multiple losses occurred simultaneously, compounding difficulties. Carlos (A, M)—the father of two adolescent children—lived through homelessness when he experienced separation from his partner as well as the illness and death of his father. Similarly, Lisa (I, W) experienced homelessness after the death of her grandmother, when she became involved with substance use and addictions.

“There are a lot of places [where] one can't get housing, but in the lower income bracket, it's just not available. It's just not. And the waiting list—I have enquired about [it and it's] up to about anywhere from 2 to 7 years. That's a long time to wait”.

Lack of education or knowledge of English. Many of the parents interviewed linked homelessness to low educational attainments and the lack of opportunities. Anglophone, Francophone and Indigenous mothers and fathers who had less than a high school education reported that their circumstances had resulted from low education or low literacy. Loree (I,W), a Cree speaker, linked her living and housing challenges to the lack of availability for translation from English into Cree: “Sometimes I don’t understand the big words. Usually, if they had a Native worker here, he used to go with me to translate. But now there is nobody here to translate for me.”

Community. A number of parents expressed the view that the high cost of housing in Timmins is related to the mining industry; thus the economic basis of the community is perceived to impact on the availability of rental accommodation. Cate (I, W) and Alain (F, M) explained this link:

It’s a mining town. I think, yeah, rents are elevated because of that (Alain, F, M).

I believe that what’s going on is because of the mines are booming, right? There’s more people moving to Timmins (Cate, I, W).

Some Cree participants also linked the lack of housing in their communities of origin on the James Bay to their circumstances in Timmins. Attawapiskat was mentioned as a community that parents leave because there is no housing for them. When they go to Timmins, they become part of the homeless population because there is no affordable housing for them in the city. Loree (I, W) explained that landlords would not rent to her because she had no one who would provide a reference letter for her.

Parents expressed the view that the high cost of housing in Timmins is related to the mining industry; thus the economic basis of the community is perceived to impact on the availability of rental accommodation.

b. Hidden homelessness

Women, primarily, were living in forms of hidden homelessness at the time of the study but some men were also in situations where they were couch surfing or double bunking with friends or family members. Others noted that they had experienced this type of homelessness in the past. Nearly a third of the parents were staying with family members or couch surfing at the homes of various friends and family members. Some women were sleeping without a bed. Lisa (I, W) and Loree (I, W) described their circumstances:

My mom puts a little blanket there in one part like in the dining room. She has a table in the living room there, so I have my own little spot there, she puts a blanket there (Lisa, I, W).

I have medical conditions, like arthritis. That basement, it’s really cold and the hard floors, with only sleeping bags. It’s really hard to get up in the morning and even use the washroom that’s upstairs from the basement (Loree, I, W).

Loree’s adolescent son stays in the basement with her. She further explained that she slept outdoors, in the bush, when the weather was good. Others also described temporary living accommodations that involved over-crowding. Mona (I, W) noted the challenge of staying with people in her social network so that her adolescent son could be with her.

[I’m] like staying here and there, all over, [with] the family, friends, just to have a place to sleep at night. Because I couldn’t even take my son to the shelter with me (Mona, I, W).

Women, primarily, were living in forms of hidden homelessness at the time of the study but some men were also in situations where they were couch surfing or double bunking with friends or family members.

Another form of hidden homelessness related to situations in which the housing was substandard and unsanitary due to infestations of rodents, insects or mould. Wayne, an Indigenous father, described living circumstances in which the small living quarters were over-run with mice.

Another form of hidden homelessness related to situations in which the housing was substandard and unsanitary due to infestations of rodents, insects or mould.

c. Histories of homelessness

Close to half of the parents interviewed had been homeless in the past. Several had been homeless in numerous Canadian towns, cities and First Nation communities. Mentioned specifically were Toronto, Edmonton, Windsor, Thunder Bay, Moosonee and Attiwapiskat. Luna (I, W) had been homeless several times when her children were infants:

Yeah, I have been in lot of homeless situations. I have been in a shelter for a while; when he [son] was a baby, I was in shelter for like 6 months—when he was about 5 months. And then I went back to living with my mom. And then I went into a shelter when she [daughter] was born, when she was only 3 months old. And, then I went back to living with my mom...and my mother got homeless too. We got evicted from our place.

Thus, having a social support network in Timmins does not mean that parents, especially Indigenous parents, can avoid becoming homeless.

Close to half of the parents interviewed had been homeless in the past.

d. Absolute homelessness

A number of the parents interviewed had experienced absolute homelessness that involved staying in homeless shelters and sleeping rough. A majority of the parents who had lived through periods of absolute homelessness were Indigenous people. However, three Francophone parents also narrated experiences of absolute homelessness and close to half of the participants (n=13) in all three socio-cultural groups were staying in a shelter at the time of the study. Mick described the living circumstances of absolute homelessness in Timmins:

You know, when you are homeless here, you have no contact. You don't go to a job. There is no phone, there is no street address. And then that, what you call [post office] box, you can't have because you don't have no street, you don't have no home address or nothing (Mick, I, M).

Similarly, Loree (I, W) described her summertime living arrangements in this manner: "During the summer, I mostly sleep outside or in a tent". At age 55, Loree was finding it difficult sleeping outdoors in a tent and her youngest child, a 17 year-old, was staying with another of Loree's children in Timmins. She wanted a more stable living situation: "I just want an apartment so I can take care of my son. That's what I want, yeah. So he can be safe." Loree was experiencing numerous barriers to obtaining housing in Timmins, including a housing program that had turned her away because she was "still drinking" and landlords who would not rent to her.

A number of the parents interviewed had experienced absolute homelessness that involved staying in homeless shelters and sleeping rough. A majority of the parents who had lived through periods of absolute homelessness were Indigenous people.

2. Impacts on Families

Experiences of homelessness impacted on both parents and their children; however, some parents stated that there were no impacts on their children. The main issues, as shown in Table 2, pertained to the perceived effects on children. Some parents also identified effects on themselves or on other family members. Mothers and fathers made similar

proportions of comments about the impacts of homelessness on families. The results indicate that the parents were more concerned about impacts on their children than on themselves or others.

Table 2. Major theme 2: Impacts on families

Minor theme	Subtheme	F	M	Total ^a
Children	Absence of parent	6	23	29
	Mental or physical health	9	6	15
	Behaviour of spouse or others	4	6	10
	Subtotal	19	35	54
Parents	Not recognizing impacts on children	5	9	14
	Self or family members	5	8	13
	Subtotal	10	17	27
Total		29	52	81

^aNumbers reflect the frequency of mention.

a. Impacts on Children

Absence of the parent. Many parents were separated from their children because the children were living or staying temporarily with other family members or were “in care” with child welfare authorities. Évonne (F, W) stated that her daughter was living with the father: “Elle reste avec son père.” Being separated from their children was difficult for most fathers and mothers. Some noted that a difficulty was that their children were not able to visit them in the place where they were living. It was primarily Indigenous women and men who spoke of this situation:

You can't be a parent living in a place like this. You don't want anyone [seeing you] in a freaking homeless shelter (Robert, A, M).

My children cannot visit me (Lorne, A, M)

[The impact is from them] not being able to see me, not being able to come around, not being able to be around with their parents, right now, where they should be, not with the grandmother (Lisa, I, W).

Lorne (A, M) noted that the shelter was an inappropriate environment for young children as “you don't know who or what's floating around”. In addition to the absence of a parent or parents, some noted that their children were adversely affected when parents did not have the financial means to contribute to their children's living expenses.

Mental or physical health. Parents were concerned about mental health or emotional impacts on their children which included stress, anger, frustration, sadness or insecurity, and the manifestation of these emotions through crying, as well as adverse physical health problems. David (A, M) had noticed that his children are angry because of his absence from their daily lives: “It sucks because it [homelessness] keeps me away from my kids. Like they get mad every time I go visit them and leave, like it's sad. Like that's all I can care about.” Leo (I, M) noted that his children “don't like it”. Further, Lisa (I, W) observed that there was a negative emotional impact on her children and that it was like “emotional abuse” for them. She stated:

Parents were concerned about mental health or emotional impacts on their children which included stress, anger, frustration, sadness or insecurity, and the manifestation of these emotions through crying, as well as adverse physical health problems.

I am like, what the hell you know, my kid cries to me all the time. She doesn't let me talk, cries every night—[she says] 'I want mommy blah blah blah'. You know, like crying, my youngest. All the time. My kids are emotionally stressed out and crying, sad all the time

Arleen felt that her young son knew that she was stressed out because of her pending eviction and that the circumstances had an impact on him: "My son knows, he senses that I'm stressed out". However she was making an effort to buffer him from experiencing harm. Arleen stated that "he's not starving, he's getting enough sleep".

However, Loree (I, W) was worried about the health of her 17-year old son who was staying in the basement of his brother's apartment with her: "At that apartment where he sleeps in the basement, I hear him coughing during the night and during the day too. I am worried about him." Safety concerns were also noted by Indigenous parents. For example, in a previous place where Loree and her son had been staying the year prior to the interview, her son was stabbed: "My son was 16 and there were too many fights there, so he got stabbed there upstairs." Loree reiterated that she wanted to get stable housing: "I just want an apartment so I can take care of my son. That's what I want." Lisa (I, W) also commented on the lack of safety and security in some housing: "It's sad because some people have to get beat up, the door kicked in for nothing."

Luna (I, W) was aware that being homeless had an impact on her children: "It just does affect my kids a lot though. Like going from place to place that's all. I don't really mind, [for] me you know, [but] I care about them; that's it". While she did not articulate the nature of the impact, she acknowledged that the lack of stability was difficult for the children.

Lisa (I, W) expressed her belief that her child's respiratory problems were linked to the presence of mould. In addition, commenting on the structural weakness in the accommodation, she also stated that her youngest child "fell through a hole in the floor".

Behaviour of spouse or others. A few parents were concerned about the conduct of others who were caring for their children. Experiencing child welfare involvement, Lisa (I, W) commented on cultural differences: "She [foster parent] doesn't let them [children] live their Native culture". In addition, she felt that the caregiver to her children was manipulating them: "She emotionally screwed with my kids' head."

David (A, M) was concerned that his ex-wife was not providing adequate care for his children. He stated: "I want to get an apartment and get both my kids back. I will take care of them myself because she [ex-wife] obviously can't. I hate being away from my kids. Just lost my sons. I have court tomorrow. I am going to try for custody again." Similarly Ben was not confident about his wife's ability to care for his children: "Send my wife to counseling. She needs it, trust me, she really does".

b. Impacts on Parents or Others

"It just does affect my kids a lot though. Like going from place to place that's all. I don't really mind, [for] me you know, [but] I care about them; that's it".

Some parents did not recognize the impacts of homelessness on their children: "He will keep to himself, he always did" (Carlos, A, M); "Umm, y-a pas de problem" (Félix, F, M); "It doesn't affect them" (Yves, F, M). In addition, a number of participants commented on the challenges of homelessness due to the separation from family members. Mick (I, M) summed up the experiences of homeless family members: "They are hurt people. Alone people, depressed. They don't have no contact, nothing to do. No street address, no phone number".

"They are hurt people. Alone people, depressed. They don't have no contact, nothing to do. No street address, no phone number".

3. Experiences with Services

In particular, fathers and mothers were concerned about the lack of services in a number of areas.

a. Barriers to accessing services

Participants identified many barriers to services (see Table 3). This was a dominant theme—one that the participants spoke about extensively. Mothers and fathers made similar proportions of comments about the barriers in accessing services.

Lack of services. In particular, fathers and mothers were concerned about the lack of services in a number of areas. These pertained firstly to the need for housing supports. Parents identified the need for a rent bank, for housing workers to deal with landlords, and for assistance with moving. Families also identified a need for services to assist with transportation, employment-seeking, recreation for families with children especially on the weekends, prevention services, counselling, case management and services for youth. In general, parents stated that the need is greater than the services that are available, and that agencies are confronted by the requirement to fundraise in order to offer the existing services. A general statement was made that there are not enough frontline services and consequently, the underlying issues are not being addressed; rather, services provide only “band-aid” solutions. David (A, M) emphasized the need for more services: “Well, first of all, you need to have services for families”.

“They should have a place for family—family homeless shelter—in town here now because it will benefit a lot of people. Because there is a lot of breaking up—like families are splitting up—because of that”.

Table 3. Major theme 3: Services

Minor theme	Subtheme	F	M	Total ^a
Barriers	Lack of services	50	78	128
	Shelters	28	55	83
	Social housing	33	9	42
	Unhelpful workers	12	21	33
	Agency rules	14	18	32
	Gap in services/no choices or options	7	22	29
	Subtotal	144	203	347
Benefits	Workers	41	41	82
	Shelters and basic needs	7	45	52
	Social network	—	12	12
	Financial supports and subsidies	4	8	12
	Subtotal	52	106	167
Total		196	209	514

^aNumbers reflect the frequency of mention.

Shelters. A second set of concerns pertained to shelters. Lisa (I, W) and Mona (I, W) explained the need for a shelter for homeless families as currently some family members are not able to stay together in the same shelter:

They should have a place for family—family homeless shelter—in town here now because it will benefit a lot of people. Because there is a lot of breaking up—like families are splitting up—because of that. You know, like

homeless [families], they can't go stay somewhere [together]; so the one has to go there and the other one has to go everywhere. And, like you know, it's not fine (Lisa, I, W).

Because when you are being homeless, it's just, it's an awful feeling itself; and having to separate from family, it's even worse you know (Mona, I, W).

In addition to the need for shelter accommodation for families and youth, the participants expressed a number of other concerns about shelters in Timmins. These concerns included the small spaces, shelter rules and regulations (e.g., such as curfews), health issues and infectious diseases, safety and security, the need for better transportation between shelters and the downtown area, as well as a lack of privacy (or excessive scrutiny) and insufficient capacity to take in all people who need emergency shelter.

A number of parents expressed dissatisfaction with rigid rules and criteria for social housing. Many homeless parents described situations in which they were not "allowed" to live with relatives in social housing units.

Social housing. The problems with social housing centred primarily on the wait list and the forms of social housing needed in Timmins. The wait list was long and some parents reported that they had been told that they may have to wait many years for social housing. It was also stated that families in crisis should have priority on the wait list. Moreover, there were concerns about the lack of availability of rental units of small size, including bachelor units, single units and one-bedroom units, as well as a lack of transitional housing, given the unaffordability of larger rental accommodations.

A number of parents expressed dissatisfaction with rigid rules and criteria for social housing. Many homeless parents described situations in which they were not "allowed" to live with relatives in social housing units. It was also stated that there was a lack of accountability regarding consistency in allocating social housing only to low income families.

Concern about unhelpful workers. Many parents had encountered workers who were deemed overly intrusive and thus hindering rather than helping to resolve matters. Such workers were described as judgmental, having a poor attitude, or being "jaded". In addition, some parents stated that workers referred inappropriately to other agencies where services for the client could not be provided. The participants of our study believed that more knowledge-sharing and collaboration were required between various service providers.

Agency rules. Parents expressed numerous concerns about rules and regulations within social service agencies; such regulations posed barriers to access and limited the provision of services. For example, these regulations affected parents who became aware of services offered by an agency but who could not gain access unless they were registered clients of the agency. This situation had occurred in the area of addictions where particular services were offered by an agency that could not be accessed by parents who did not have addictions issues. In contrast, other agencies required sobriety in order for parents to access the services. Parents noted that some agencies were overly bureaucratic and required parents to open accounts in order to access services. Dawna (I, F) stated, "It's half like jail. You got to do what you're told all the time."

OW and ODSP were specifically mentioned as services in which rules and regulations were barriers. For example, some parents who were receiving financial benefits stated that this did not guarantee the receipt of other programs or services offered by OW or ODSP, such as help with the first and last month's rent. In addition, these programs were deemed to be punitive in the way that wages/earnings were deducted from the cheques. Parents were also concerned about some programs or services that were only in place for a short period of time and then discontinued. Finally, homeless parents felt disadvantaged by programs or services that required proof of identification, address or employment. Some noted that they had been disqualified from services because of such requirements; Shari (A, W) said, "They are like, 'we need to see your paystub.' And I just felt like, why do you need my paystub? I am here because I need food that's why I just kind of left."

OW and ODSP were specifically mentioned as services in which rules and regulations were barriers.

Gaps in services. It was noted that “every kind of service” (David, A, M) for families was needed in Timmins. The gap in services also included the lack of options for parents who had been refused a service or program. Loree (I, W) explained that the absence of choices was affecting her son and herself: “Yes, I have my 17 year old, but he has been staying with his brother. He is now. And I am not with him right now, right now. They cut him off from my cheque because I have no fixed address. So I have to support him still. I am on disability.”

Many parents identified a gap in services that would provide a location or fun activities for children during weekends. Ben (A, M) stated, “Finding a half decent place, at least quiet, where my kids can have fun on weekends [is needed]. You know, take em’ fishing, hiking, you know, stuff like that”. Indigenous parents also noted the need for services to be offered on weekends and holidays.

Many parents identified a gap in services that would provide a location or fun activities for children during weekends.

b. Benefits of services

While parents spoke about numerous barriers to accessing services, they also valued and praised existing services, noting the strengths of workers, the provision for basic needs, existing shelters, subsidy programs, and the social networks to which they gained access by being involved with a program or service. All except five parents made positive comments about existing services. Mothers made fewer comments about the benefits of services, with the exception of statements about workers. Mothers made slightly more comments about workers that were positive in nature.

Workers. Many participants were grateful to workers and commented that they were helpful, nice or awesome. Parents appreciated workers’ skills in offering counselling, medical or mental health supports, housing or employment supports, prevention work, community education and advocacy, case management or case-specific services (e.g., age specific supports for elders, youth, couples, or families) and appropriate referrals. Some participants mentioned that they greatly valued workers who emphasized empowerment and the dignity of those who accessed services.

Shelters and basic needs. Many participants praised shelters and greatly valued their presence in Timmins. Parents commented positively about being able to receive a bed, food, safety and other amenities. They liked policies that allowed them to have a long stay, enough time in the shelter and support to become stabilized. They also appreciated the services offered such as outreach, work with schools to help youth, and efforts to be culturally sensitive as well as to find ways to accommodate the needs of members of families.

Parents spoke positively about services that supported them in addressing basic needs such as food, hygiene (e.g., shower facilities), clothing, transportation (e.g., obtaining bus tickets), appliances, and furniture. Fathers more often commented on these positive aspects of services.

Social networks. Being able to connect with other people using services was perceived to be another benefit of services in Timmins. Connections with others created support systems, friendship networks and opportunities to socialize with other families. Indigenous people commented positively on services that enabled them to become connected with their cultural traditions and activities through engagement with others.

Financial supports and subsidies. A number of fathers and mothers appreciated having access to financial supports and subsidies. Mona (I, W) explained the importance of the financial supports: “Just being on Ontario Works [is vital]. Just, a lot of them, just automatically, you know, your worker just tells you what you need to know. If you have children with you, they will give you a list, like for Soup Kitchens, all the clothing exchange programs and food banks and stuff like that.”

Many participants were grateful to workers and commented that they were helpful, nice or awesome.

4. Mental and Physical Health Issues

The mental health challenges also impacted on physical health.

Mental health issues were mentioned more often than physical health (see Table 4). Overall, mothers and fathers made similar proportions of comments about the health issues. Parents spoke of the many emotional impacts of homelessness. They described sadness or depression, shame and embarrassment, isolation and loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness and loss of motivation, feeling vulnerable and misunderstood, frustrated or bored. Mothers and fathers in all three socio-cultural groups spoke about the mental health impacts associated with homelessness.

Table 4. Major theme 4: Health

Minor theme	Subtheme	F	M	Total ^a
Mental health	Impact of homelessness	40	58	98
Physical health	Disabilities	5	12	17
Total		45	70	115

^aNumbers reflect the frequency of mention.

Mick (I, M) explained the nature of homelessness based on his experience: “They are hurt people, alone people, depressed...” Mona (I, W) also emphasized the emotional effects of homelessness: “Well it does affect me emotionally, a lot. Because of like, I don’t know, just not having my own place and that. And just being, like, stressed out, especially with the kids and that.” Similarly, Jacques (F, M) stated “It’s the housing that puts me in this health-wise [situation]. Like, I was depressed for a while.” David (A, M) summed up the many emotions he was feeling: “Emotional. At some time you think there is no hope. But the anxiety, it kicks and makes you scared, like concerned.” Because of these varied emotional impacts, parents felt that they were vulnerable to abuse and that it was easy for others to take advantage of them.

The mental health challenges also impacted on physical health for some. Tony (I, M) stated: “My health, yeah, I think [homelessness has impacts], not eating right and not taking care of myself. Yeah it does [affect me]. Other participants identified a range of physical ailments such as diabetes, stroke, heart attack, arthritis, joint problems (e.g., hip, knee surgery), mobility issues (e.g., in a wheel chair, requiring a cane), visual impairment, chronic pain and exhaustion. Évonne (F, W) stated : “J’ai de la misère à marcher.” Similarly, Félix noted: “Ouais, j’ai b’én du problème physique.” Many parents expressed the view that their mental and physical health issues could be addressed if they were able to obtain suitable housing.

Mothers and fathers in all three socio-cultural groups spoke about the mental health impacts associated with homelessness.

Parents spoke positively about services that supported them in addressing basic needs such as food, hygiene (e.g., shower facilities), clothing, transportation (e.g., obtaining bus tickets), appliances, and furniture.

5. Resilience

Comments of nearly all participants (27 of 30) revealed forms of resilience in their struggles with homelessness. Their narratives of resilience pertained to aspects of resourcefulness, personal development, and strategies for improving their situation (see Table 5). Mothers made substantially more comments relating to resilience compared to fathers.

With regard to resourcefulness, parents spoke about approaches to addressing basic needs. They accessed food banks, church programs, thrift stores, shelters, social assistance and cooking classes. Making use of some programs was difficult and required parents to endure poor treatment, intensive questioning and even racism. Lisa (I, W) explained how people shared information within their networks about places where one might encounter racism:

People say, 'No, you don't go to them. I said the Friendship Centre here is not racist. And they do give a lot of help at this Friendship Center... Like this one helps the most. Like they have a lot of things for kids, lots of activities, lots of help to help you. If they can't help you, they will find another way that will get somebody to help you.

Table 5. Major theme 5: Resilience

Minor theme	Subtheme	F	M	Total ^a
Resourcefulness	Addressing basic needs	20	17	37
	Accessing programs	22	11	33
	Social assistance	10	23	33
	Native Friendship Centres	18	4	22
	Subtotal	70	55	125
Personal development	Education/training	15	6	21
	Treatment/detox	5	5	10
	Subtotal	20	11	31
Improving situation	—	9	15	24
Total		99	81	180

^aNumbers reflect the frequency of mention.

In some instances, participants stated that the quality of services was poor but they persisted with them. The comments about searching for and gaining access to services were extensive and varied. Mona (I, W) explained how she managed to address her needs and those of her children by being resourceful: "I just really mapped out exactly what I had, what I was going to make, right down to the last, you know, package [of goods]." Caren (I, W) attended a cooking class and obtained extra food: "In September, they actually had a cooking class for the Porcupine Health Unit. And they gave extra groceries to go home." Évonne (F, W) described how she obtained linens: "On a une église ou tu peux aller chercher du linge."

Another form of resilience was evident in the strategies that parents used to further their personal development. Cate (I, W) explained the importance of continuing with her education: "Being able to go and take these courses I'm on. Like the ones on trades. That will help us out. To

Their narratives of resilience pertained to aspects of resourcefulness, personal development, and strategies for improving their situation.

Some parents also explained how they were actively engaged in treatment programs to recover from addictions.

further my education.” Parents were pursuing varied forms of education or training by taking courses to obtain high school credits, specific job training, enhancing life skills, taking French language courses or learning how to prepare a resume.

Some parents also explained how they were actively engaged in treatment programs to recover from addictions. Parents spoke of attending Alcoholics Anonymous, methadone programs, or alcohol counselling. Others were striving to improve their living circumstances through intensive job search, seeking a way to meet the requirements of child welfare authorities with regard to the number of bedrooms required, or applying for disability benefits in order to achieve stability.

6. Issues Identified by Indigenous Parents

Indigenous mothers made substantially more comments about racism and discrimination and cultural aspects, while Indigenous fathers spoke more about migration issues.

a. Racism and discrimination

Indigenous mothers made substantially more comments about racism and discrimination and cultural aspects, while Indigenous fathers spoke more about migration issues. Both Indigenous mothers and fathers spoke about their awareness of racism. Mick (I, M) and Lisa (I, W) explained this aspect: “There is so much, what you call racism. There is racism in town, you know” (Mick). “Native girls keep coming in and they think they are going to get a job. They are not going to get a job here, blah blah blah, racist” (Lisa). Lisa also asserted that racism affects access to services: “I went in one place there and the guy does not like Native people whatsoever. And I found that out after my friends, like said ‘Oh, the only thing he didn’t [help] is because he doesn’t like Native people.”

Table 6. Major theme 6: Concerns of Indigenous Parents

Minor theme	Subtheme	F	M	Total ^a
Racism and discrimination		22	5	27
Cultural aspects		11	1	12
Migration		4	10	14
Total		37	16	53

^aNumbers reflect the frequency of mention.

b. Cultural aspects

A number of Indigenous parents were concerned about the limited number of culturally specific and culturally competent/safe programs available to them. These concerns were noted by four Indigenous parents. Dawna (I, W) explained that this issue was related to a lack of funding:

I’m trying to look for services out there for Indigenous women and all that. It’s kind of scarce because it seems like there, the service providers out there are tapping into the same money. [An Indigenous agency has] a lot of holistic approach services geared to Indigenous people. So I do a lot of traditional painting and stuff like that. So it’s really helpful.

Others were concerned that some programs, including child welfare, were not providing culturally sensitive services. Lisa (I, W) stated: “[Foster mother] doesn’t let them live their Native culture.”

c. Migration

Several parents spoke about the challenges of migration, including moving from James Bay communities to Timmins. It was noted that the lack of housing in First Nations communities was linked to migration to the city. The high cost of housing, as discussed above, was a barrier to obtaining rental accommodation in Timmins. However, others spoke of having moved to Timmins from other towns and cities in northeastern Ontario and other locations. For example, Matthew (I, M) spoke about his extensive moves: “Yeah, in and out of shelters, so not only in Timmins. I have been homeless in Thunder Bay, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, just moving around.” Angela explained a recent move to Timmins: “We just recently moved back from North Bay and uh, in North Bay, we couldn’t afford the housing we were in.” Comments made by Matthew and Angela are indicative of the barriers to obtaining housing in various communities in Northern Ontario and elsewhere.

A number of Indigenous parents were concerned about the limited number of culturally specific and culturally competent/safe programs available to them.

C. Findings from Focus Groups

The same organizing system of codes was used to analyze the individual interviews and focus groups. Tables 7 to 12 show the results of the analysis of the 6 focus groups. These results provide support for the findings from the individual interviews in that only 3 of 38 themes discussed in the interviews were not identified in one or more of the 6 focus groups: only 8 of 38 themes did not arise in the service provider discussion groups and 9 of 38 themes did not arise in the family discussion groups. There was some overlap in the themes that arose in individual interviews but not in the focus groups with families and service providers.

The results suggested that service providers were less aware of the impacts of homelessness on families and of the resilience of homeless family members compared with parents. The themes discussed in individual interviews with parents but not in focus groups with parents pertained to all 6 major themes arising from the interview data. The finding that one or two subthemes for each major theme was not discussed in the two focus groups with parents may well be related to the particular experiences of the focus group participants.

Service providers were less aware of the impacts of homelessness on families and of the resilience of homeless family members compared with parents.

A more significant finding is that 35 of 38 or 92% of the themes arose in both individual interviews and in focus groups (see Figure 1). The results provided below include information pertaining to any theme discussed by either service providers or families within the focus groups. For example, if a theme was not discussed by families, the service provider perspective is provided. However, if a theme was not discussed by service providers, the family perspective is given. No additional information is provided for three themes which did not emerge in any of the focus groups. It should be noted that the sections above dealing with individual interviews contain information about all 38 themes/subthemes.

A significant finding is that 35 of 38 or 92% of the themes arose in both individual interviews and in focus groups.

1. Explanations of homelessness

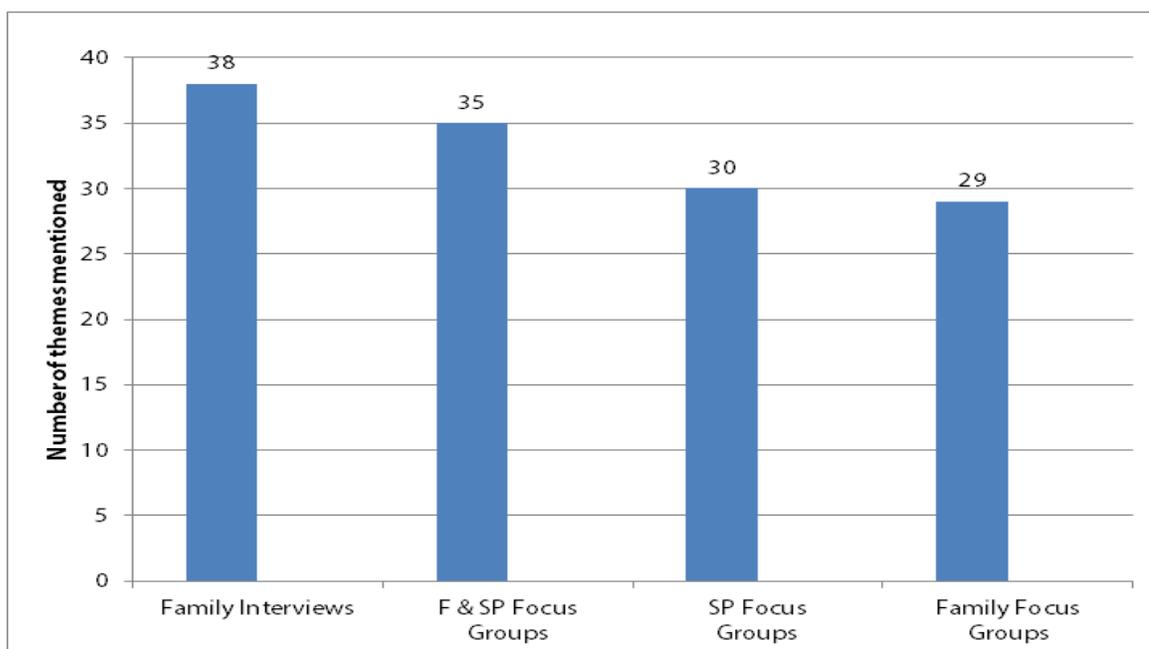
Table 7 shows the results regarding the reasons for homelessness, hidden homelessness histories of homelessness and experience of absolute homelessness. The results compare the themes identified by service providers with those for

family members. Notably, all subthemes from the interviews arose in the focus groups except for health or mental health issues which were not mentioned by families. In addition, families did not speak about issues of overcrowding and couch surfing in the focus groups whereas these issues were discussed by service providers. Families did not discuss histories of homelessness, an issue that was identified by service providers.

Many service providers based their comments on perceptions and examples from those who accessed their services. A service provider explained a perspective on the link between mental health and homelessness, but the comment also reveals an understanding of the complexity of family homelessness which can result from other issues, such as divorce or a death in the family:

A divorce, a death in the family or mental health, disease might have introduced themselves into the family and has broken the family up. So we see a lot of, lot of clients. And a lot of our clients come from the mental health unit (Service provider focus group 1).

Figure 1. Number of themes mentioned in individual interviews and focus groups



Note: F refers to family and SP refers to service provider

In contrast with the view that homelessness is linked to the problems of an individual, the homeless family members emphasized structural issues such as housing, lack of income or education, and characteristics of the community.

Service providers spoke to the issue of hidden homelessness specifically in the forms of couch surfing and overcrowding:

You don't have enough housing space [in Timmins], like literally physical apartments, for people. So do you find, like, these people are living with many people together? Yes, often (Service provider focus group 5).

You don't see a lot of homeless people in the streets in Timmins but you hear a lot about couch surfing and those kinds of things (Service provider focus group 2).

Homeless family members emphasized structural issues such as housing, lack of income or education and characteristics of the community.

A case example: I met up with clients; they live in a rooming house. They don't have different rooms. I am talking about one particular building—had about 10 units, 10 rooms in there. They all shared a bathroom. And the kitchen had one burner working; in this kitchen, the stove had one burner working, the oven didn't work. The shower was very dirty, that place was very, very filthy. So then when I asked the lady—who had shown it to me—to contact the landlord, she let me. But then, when it came time to speak to the rental board, she has to make those calls herself. Well, there is a language barrier with the clients that I serve. A lot of them speak Cree and have a difficult time speaking English. She was having a difficult time speaking English. It's just to follow through those steps to do something about that, it's just kind of hard (Service provider focus group 3).

The service providers recognized that homeless people may have extensive histories of living in challenging circumstances and some have difficulty in addressing them, at times due to linguistic or cultural issues.

Table 7. Major theme 1: Explanations of homelessness

Minor theme	Subtheme	Service Provider	Family
Reasons for homelessness	Housing issues	✓	✓
	Lack of income	✓	✓
	Health or mental health issues	✓	—
	Relationship issues	✓	✓
	Community	✓	✓
	Lack of education	✓	✓
Hidden homelessness	Overcrowding and couch surfing	✓	—
	Substandard housing	✓	✓
	Landlords	✓	✓
Histories of homelessness	—	✓	—
Absolute homelessness	—	✓	✓

2. Impacts on families

The service providers recognized that homeless people may have extensive histories of living in challenging circumstances and some have difficulty in addressing them, at times due to linguistic or cultural issues.

Table 8, pertaining to the impacts of homelessness on families, shows that service providers had less awareness than parents about the impacts of homelessness on families. While the mental health impacts of homelessness were discussed by service providers, they did not raise impacts relating to the absence of parents, concerns about the behaviour of spouses/ex-partners or others, the possible ways in which parents may not recognize impacts of homelessness on children, or the impacts on homeless parents and other family members. Within the family focus groups, the latter two issues—relating to impacts on parents, and other family members—were also not discussed.

A parent and a grandparent noted their concerns about living in a shelter and being away from the children:

Staying in the shelter I can't see my grandchild. I can't see them because I am here. I am really frustrated (Family focus group 4).

I would just like any place that my daughter could live in, that's all. I just want my daughter back (Family focus group 4).

Table 8. Major theme 2: Impacts on families

Minor theme	Subtheme	Service Provider	Family
Children	Absence of parent or grandparent	—	✓
	Mental health	✓	✓
	Behaviour of spouse or others	—	✓
Parents	Not recognizing impacts on children	—	—
	Self or family members	—	—

A parent commented about her prior circumstances in living with an abusive man. Her statement generally speaks to concerns about the abusive behaviour. However, her comment is also revealing in that she explains how her former partner had kept her from speaking to others about the abuse. This is a factor that poses challenges in obtaining the participation of parents with children.

I feel because I was in an abusive relationship, and probably would still be if he wasn't in jail, I had a hard time coming to the women's shelter, like getting help for now, because I was so vulnerable to him. And he told me not to come here and not to talk to you or anybody that worked here (Family focus group 4).

Another parent explained her worries about the behaviour of her children's grandmother and its' potential effects on her children.

"Staying in the shelter I can't see my grandchild. I can't see them because I am here. I am really frustrated."

My three other kids were taken. Well not taken—I had them last year for school when I stayed at my mom's. I don't have a full custody of them. [Starts sobbing.] It's their grandmother, their father's grandmother who has whole custody of them. I sent them up there for a month and she kept them. She didn't send them back. She just fuckin oh—somebody told me that my son was forgotten at the park; who the fuck forgets their kid at the fucking park, you know? So I called her back. She is like, well, I am not going to send them back to you right away because you don't have a place to live. So that's what I am living with right now. I don't get to see, I don't get my poor kids because of that (Family focus group 4).

"I feel because I was in abusive relationship and probably would still be if he wasn't in jail, I had a hard time coming to the women's shelter, like getting help for now, because I was so vulnerable to him. And he told me not to come here and not to talk to you or anybody that worked here."

3. Services

Table 9 shows that parents did not speak about the barriers related to shelter stays while this issue was discussed by service providers. In addition, parents did not mention the benefits arising from social networks generated through involvement with services and programs whereas service providers did so. In contrast, service providers did not acknowledge the benefits for homeless families that come from financial supports and subsidies they receive through programs such as Ontario Works and the Ontario Disabilities Support Program.

With regard to shelters in Timmins, service providers made a number of comments, including some comments about barriers or limitations:

So the shelters, we have 3 in town, one for men, one for homeless women and two for battered women. And then 30 minutes away (Matheson) we have another one for battered women and then an hour away for another men’s homeless shelter (Service provider focus group 3).

And even accepting them within our shelter can be a challenge because we don’t have a room big enough for more than say, what, 2 kids, mom and 2 kids or 3 at most (Service provider focus group 2).

These service providers acknowledged that there can be transportation issues associated with a stay in a shelter, especially those that are located a distance away from Timmins.

Table 9. Major theme 3: Services

Minor theme	Subtheme	Service Provider	Family
Barriers	Lack of services	✓	✓
	Shelters	✓	—
	Social housing	✓	✓
	Unhelpful workers	✓	✓
	Agency rules	✓	✓
	Gap in services/no choices or options	✓	✓
Benefits	Workers	✓	✓
	Basic needs	✓	✓
	Social networks	✓	—
	Financial supports and subsidies	—	✓

In addition, there is limited capacity for homeless families within the shelter system in Timmins. Service providers appeared to recognize the benefits that programs offer with regard to the formation of social networks. A service provider’s comments suggest that the agency made an effort to connect people in varied programs:

“And even accepting them within our shelter can be a challenge because we don’t have a room big enough for more than say, what, 2 kids, mom and 2 kids or 3 at most.”

I think all the programs are useful because we hit from prenatal to elders. We do a lot of networking amongst each other. So I think, you know, homeless are not [isolated]. Everybody can benefit from all the programs that we do have (Service provider focus group 3).

In the family focus groups, some spoke of the benefits of receiving financial support, however meagre, from Ontario Works or Ontario Disabilities Support Program:

[For] shelter, you know, like I am on OW. My rent goes to the shelter which helps pay for food, our clothing—we get this much of allowance a week (Family focus group 4).

Well here they provide you all that stuff, like if you are on the street, if you are homeless, you are getting your OW cheque or ODSP cheque or whatever you get. And if you have nowhere to live they are only going to give your basic needs—which is (pause) something like 200 and some dollars a month or whatever. And there is places to eat here, like Lord’s kitchen and stuff. But that’s only once a week (Family focus group 4).

4. Health

There is limited capacity for homeless families within the shelter system in Timmins.

Table 10 shows the results relating to mental and physical health. These issues were discussed by service providers but, within the family focus group, physical health problems did not arise. Service providers spoke of the disabilities and physical health issues that homeless people experience. One service provider commented on a common health issue that affects homeless people's feet and legs, while another spoke specifically about the health risks for Indigenous women:

Most homeless people have problems with their feet because they walk all day. They walk and walk and walk outside in running shoes. Their toes are sticking out; they haven't got money to buy a new pair. And most have ulcers and wounds on their feet also. And a lot of homeless people lose, end up losing their feet or losing their leg because they aren't looked after (Service provider focus group 1).

Cultural barriers, you know, the family size, just not even knowing about the services and that they exist, and what's offered through the service if they can actually access it. They [Indigenous people] face a lot more barriers than [others]. I mean, not that they are different, don't get me wrong. Francophone women face barriers when it comes to languages and those kinds of things. But I mean Indigenous women are in the situation where they face a greater, like they have greater lethality risk—just being Indigenous women in the first place (Service provider focus group 2).

"Most homeless people have problems with their feet because they walk all day. They walk and walk and walk outside in running shoes. Their toes are sticking out; they haven't got money to buy new pair. And most have ulcers and wounds on their feet also."

Table 10. Major theme 4: Health

Minor theme	Subtheme	Service Provider	Family
Mental health	Impact of homelessness	✓	✓
Physical health	Disabilities	✓	—

The second excerpt above from the second service provider focus group identifies how the physical health challenges for Indigenous women, in particular, include a higher risk of dying while homeless. The comment also raises the added difficulties for families that are not aware of the services that can support them.

"Indigenous women are in the situation where they face a greater, like they have greater lethality risk—just being Indigenous women in the first place."

5. Resilience

The topic of resilience emerged as a strong theme in the individual interviews as well as the focus groups with families (see Table 11). The only subtheme not discussed by families was detoxification and treatment for substance use issues, which can be a sensitive topic to discuss in a group setting.

While issues relating to resilience were acknowledged by service providers through discussions about addressing basic needs, the pursuit of education or training, and efforts to obtain income and housing, they did not discuss four of the issues identified in Table 11. These topics pertained to the efforts on the part of homeless families to access programs, the demonstration of resilience in seeking financial support through social assistance, the programs offered by Native Friendship Centres, and the pursuit of addictions treatment or detox services.

Parents spoke of the efforts of families in order to obtain what is needed for survival. In the first excerpt from family focus group 6, a parent was living through hidden homelessness, with rent that exceeded the income from OW. This quotation illustrates how families must rely on food that is provided free of charge. The second quote from focus group 6 further illustrates the struggle to obtain food or other goods from a service provider when transportation is needed. The third quote from this same focus group explains that a mother had found a good resource for free clothing. The fourth excerpt from focus group 4 reveals that parents “are at the mercy” of others when they need to access items for survival. These excerpts show that parents must be resilient in order to navigate through and to the service system.

So really you are at the mercy of other people to ask them for things and stuff like that if you are not living at the shelter.

I pay rent but my welfare is \$900 and something and my rent is \$1000, so basically all of it. So there is no money there. But so I always have to depend on free food or whatever stuff like that (Family focus group 6).

Sometimes it’s hard to get out there on weekends because everybody is closed. It will be nice to have like a shuttle bus or something, that or someone that provides a ride on the weekend, and they provide passes wherever to use the bus. Unless friends are there, but they need, like gas money, you know (Family focus group 6).

I find that the women’s children services, a free clothing program [is helpful]. They offer free clothing exchange at the crisis center. They give out free clothing for the family and women and children (Family Focus Group 6).

So really you are at the mercy of other people to ask them for things and stuff like that if you are not living at the shelter. At the shelter they will provide you with everything if you stay at the shelter (Family focus group 4).

A mother explained how she periodically experiences circumstances of overcrowding when her daughter must move back in with her. The following quotation illustrates how Ontario Works can be helpful, but it is also a challenge to access (“they go through a bunch of stuff”). Moreover, the benefits do not cover the rent in Timmins, let alone other essential expenses:

I have a daughter that’s well (pause), she comes back to where I live. Every time I move, she will tend to come moving with me. Because the rent in Timmins is so high and most of the landlords in Timmins ask for first and last and that will be like, I don’t know, not reasonable. She is also on Ontario Works you know. Like over that, they have to go through a bunch of stuff. They qualify [for the benefits], you know they can’t afford that rent you know, [like] lot of young people. But you can’t move you know, really (Family focus group 6).

In the following excerpt, a mother explained how the Timmins Native Friendship Centre (and another service provider) offered support for her basic needs and her child’s health condition:

If I am low on diapers, I went out to go buy them myself. And then they, [service provider] were like ‘Oh you are not supposed to spend your own money on him.’ And I am like, ‘Well what else am I supposed to do, you guys aren’t paying for it, you know, like I asked you.’ And then I asked CFS to help me out. And then they bought a box for him too. And then the Friendship center bought diaper rash cleaning things too (Family Focus Group 4).

Parents spoke of the efforts of families in order to obtain what is needed for survival.

Table 11. Major theme 5: Resilience

Minor theme	Subtheme	Service Provider	Family
Resourcefulness	Addressing basic needs	✓	✓
	Accessing programs	—	✓
	Social assistance	—	✓
	Native Friendship Centres	—	✓
Personal development	Education/training	✓	✓
	Treatment/detox	—	—
Improving situation	Efforts to obtain housing, income	✓	✓

6. Indigenous Parents

Parents discussed racism and discrimination experienced by homeless families as well as cultural issues

Table 12 shows the topics identified by Indigenous people in the individual interviews. Within the service provider focus groups, all three topics were discussed. Parents discussed racism and discrimination experienced by homeless families as well as cultural issues, but the topic of migration did not emerge. The following comments from service providers in focus groups speak to the migration of families, including Indigenous women from James Bay coastal communities to Timmins.

Indigenous women face a lot more barriers than the other two groups [Anglophones and Francophones]. I mean there is, there is geographical barriers that we have women coming from up the coast, because there is a shelter in Moosonee. But if you are from Moosonee, it's a pretty small community. You don't have a lot of confidentiality there (Service provider focus group 2)

Lots of people come from out of town to integrate into the community. Their skill level is low; if they do get a job, it might be at Walmart or at McDonalds where the payment is minimum wage, and when you have a wife and maybe 2 or 3 children to look after, feed, it's a bad mix, the money is just not there (Service provider focus group 1).

Table 12. Major theme 6: Indigenous persons

Minor theme	Subtheme	Service Provider	Family
Racism and discrimination	—	✓	✓
Migration	—	✓	—
Cultural aspects	—	✓	✓

Indigenous women face a lot more barriers than the other two groups [Anglophones and Francophones]. I mean there is, there is geographical barriers that we have women coming from up the coast, because there is a shelter in Moosonee.

IV. CONCLUSION

The greatest number of comments by parents pertained to barriers to accessing services. Mothers made substantially more comments about barriers that were related to the unavailability of social housing.

The results of the individual interviews and focus groups show a striking pattern in which service providers identified almost all of the same issues as homeless parents with regard to the experience of homelessness in Timmins. In addition, the main results from the interviews with parents were confirmed in the analysis of focus groups with a different group of participants who were homeless parents. Furthermore, the finding that over three-quarters of the themes were identified in all three qualitative data sets (i.e., individual interviews, parent focus groups and service provider focus groups) constitutes a form of triangulation which indicates the strength of the qualitative component of the six-phase study.

Based on frequency of mention of the major themes, the greatest number of comments by parents pertained to barriers to accessing services. Taking into account the views of parents, a range of services is required in Timmins to address the needs of homeless families. In addition, many agencies may be able to support families more effectively by reviewing their policies and practices and by determining how to ensure that they are “family friendly”.

Mothers made substantially more comments about barriers that were related to the unavailability of social housing. The shortage of social housing is a major issue in cities and towns across Ontario, and indeed in Canada as a whole. While the involvement of senior levels of government is required to bring about substantial development within the social housing sector, local governments can play a part in stimulating new developments (Shaikh, Kauppi & Pallard, 2013).

It is notable that both fathers and mothers made numerous comments about the strengths of workers in agencies. The positive comments in this area speak well to the commitment of most people who serve homeless people in general and homeless families in particular.

With regard to comments pertaining to resilience, the narratives of mothers suggested that they may do more than fathers to access programs and address basic needs. This issue requires further study in future research. In addition, it was primarily mothers who spoke about their efforts to obtain education and training in order to change their circumstances. This finding could possibly reflect the general trend within Canada for women to seek more education compared to men (HRSDC, 2012).

It is also worth noting that, in comparison to fathers, Indigenous mothers made substantially more comments about experiences of racism and discrimination. These women spoke about racism within Timmins more generally, but also within the housing market and some services. In addition, service providers commented on the higher risk of death for Indigenous women compared to women from other socio-demographic backgrounds. Strategies to address racism and discrimination

It is notable that both fathers and mothers made numerous comments about the strengths of workers in agencies. The positive comments speak well to the commitment of most people who serve homeless people.

need to be developed to ensure that all Indigenous people receive fair and just treatment. The implementation of such strategies within front-line services for homeless people may benefit Indigenous people who use them.

Indigenous mothers made substantially more comments about experiences of racism and discrimination. These women spoke about racism within Timmins more generally but also within the housing market and some services.

Implications for future research

Conducting research pertaining to homelessness among families is extremely challenging. Our experience gained through research projects over the span of more than 13 years with homeless people in general has shown that this is a difficult population from which to recruit. As homeless people are often marginalized and oppressed, many do not wish to participate for varied reasons. Developing trust is vital to any study, but even more essential when it comes to vulnerable groups (Liamputtang, 2007).

Recruiting homeless families poses particular challenges as they may be fearful of the involvement of child welfare authorities.

Recruiting homeless families poses particular challenges as they may be fearful of the involvement of child welfare authorities. Indeed, some people interviewed had been through this experience. Further compounding this challenge is the ethical responsibility of researchers to attend to the limits of confidentiality. The consent form for this project advised participants about the limits to confidentiality and the duty to report neglect or abuse of children. Moreover, some parents and service providers acknowledged that those who are living in abusive situations are fearful of speaking to others. Indeed one of our participants stated that her former partner had warned her not to speak to anyone.

Despite the recruitment challenges, homeless and near homeless families in three cultural groups participated in this study. The successful recruitment and completion of individual and focus group interviews required a range strategies including hiring bilingual research assistants in Timmins and involving a bilingual, tri-cultural research team in the project, translating project materials into French, obtaining approval from the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board, engaging in intensive training of research assistants, building relationships with service providers in Timmins, establishing trust with service providers and homeless families, conducting interviews in a sensitive, yet systematic manner, and hiring a bilingual team for the transcription of audio recordings and for the various steps in the coding process.

The research process generated considerable material for the qualitative analysis and the results fill a vital gap in knowledge about the experiences of homeless families. In particular, this qualitative study offers new insights into the perspectives of homeless fathers and Indigenous parents within the northeastern Ontario City of Timmins, as well as describing views and experiences of people who provide services to homeless families.

In particular, this qualitative study offers new insights into the perspectives of homeless fathers and Indigenous parents within the northeastern Ontario City of Timmins.

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APPENDIX A Major and Minor Themes

Table A-1. Major themes, minor themes and subthemes emerging from the analysis

Major theme	Minor theme	Subtheme
Reasons for homelessness	Housing issues	Lack of affordable housing, increases in rent, substandard housing, no accessible housing, long wait lists for social housing, break-in at prior housing
	Lack of income	Financial support inadequate, minimum wage too low, lack of employment, OW/ODPS too low or too restrictive, increased prevalence of poverty and homelessness, high cost of food, unable to pay rent
	Relationship issues	Domestic violence, abuse or intergenerational abuse, seeking safety, family crises, death of a family member, responsibility for grandchildren, divorce or separation
	Health or mental health issues	Disability, depression, substance use or addictions, "poor" mental health
	Lack of education	Education not affordable, low literacy, need for language translation
	Discrimination and racism	Landlords won't rent to Indigenous people, people with disabilities, people with children, social housing rules and criteria pose disadvantages
	Identification and documentation	Need ID to obtain access to supports
	Criminal record	Limits opportunities
	Challenges of First Nations	Housing shortages, housing politics
Histories of homelessness	Prior experience with homelessness, street wisdom, holding/keeping secrets, seeking safety	

Absolute homelessness	Sleeping rough, panhandling, no place to live	
	Discriminatory practices of landlords	
	Eat better when at shelter	
Hidden homelessness	Overcrowding	
	Pending eviction	
	Substandard housing/ need for quiet housing	
	Vulnerability to losing housing	
	Landlords	Problems with landlords, being taken advantage of
	Hidden costs of housing	
Migration	Effects of numerous moves and lack of stability	
	Migrated to Timmins to provide better opportunities for children	
	Did not know where else to go	
Mental health	Mental health is a barrier to access	Services and housing
	Impacts of homelessness on mental health	Depression, embarrassment, shame, isolation, loneliness, loss of motivation
Physical health	Disabilities	ODSP issues, mobility/accessibility issues
	Unable to sleep	
	Unable to work	
Cultural aspects	Need for cultural sensitivity in mainstream services and organizations	Recognition of intergenerational connections, involvement of child welfare
	Importance of traditional Indigenous activities	
	Need for culturally safe services and programs	
Racism and discrimination	Racialization of Indigenous people	Includes appearance
	Ageism	Discrimination against young parents and older adults responsible for children
	Ableism	
	Discrimination against people who have a criminal record	

Impacts on families	Unable to “be there” for children	
	Lack of interest in dating relationships due to responsibility for children	
	Stress related to lack of contact with children	
	Concern about behaviour of spouse/partner and impacts on children	
	Children out of school	
	Mental health impacts on children	Young children and adolescents
	Challenges of maintaining contact with family members	Children feeling emotional about absent parent
	Older children having to move out due to overcrowding	
	Not recognizing impacts on children	
Employment	No access to employment	
	Full-time employment only available on weekends	No childcare for children
	Requirements of employment conflict with needs of families	Always on the road, working, busy

Barriers to services or problematic aspects	Shelters	Distance (too far away), stuck at shelter, transportation, shelter rules, lack of privacy, small spaces, separating family members, lack of a family shelter, safety issues
	Social housing	Strict or rigid rules and criteria, long wait lists, lack of priority wait list for families in crisis
	Lack of services	Housing supports, transportation, counselling services, supports for employment-seeking, recreation for families with children especially on the weekends
	No choices or options	
	Workers who hinder more than help, intrusive	
	Agency rules and regulations	Limitations on provision of benefits, requirement to show ID or proof of employment-seeking, curfew, requirements for sobriety
	Poor quality of food	
	Exposure to others who are high risk	Fear of bringing children to services, conflicts between lifestyles of those who are sober and those who use substances
	Gap in services on weekends	No weekend activities for children, lack of appropriate spaces for visiting with children not in care of parents
	Emotional aspects	Feeling too shy to access services, made to feel guilty for accessing services, experiencing chaos at service locations
	Difficulty in finding/ locating services	
Benefits of services	Workers	Helpful, nice, keep people "in line"
	Subsidies	
	Shelters	Located in a good area of the city
	Lack of access to telephone for communication	
	Social network	Establish friendships, dating relationship, connections
	Agency rules and regulations	Limitations on provision of benefits, requirement to show ID or proof of employment-seeking, curfew, requirements for sobriety

Resilience	Resourcefulness, “making do”, self-care, locating services obtaining money from employment	Food banks, church programs, employment centre, Native Friendship Centre, free services—eye glasses, prescriptions, social assistance, bus tickets from social assistance, utilizing employee benefits
	Diligence and attention to safety issues	
	Learning about networks for help-seeking	Formal and informal
	Engaging in advocacy	
	Personal development	Education and training, volunteer work
	Engaging in efforts to obtain housing, income	
	Decision or desire to stay in Timmins	