

# THIS IS NOT HOME



## POLICY BRIEF

# About This is Not Home

*This is Not Home* (TINH) is a community-based participatory research project bringing together six gender-specific low-barrier drop-in programs across Canada, serving multiply-marginalized women (cis and trans) and gender-diverse people:

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Sistering (Toronto ON)

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My Sister's Place (London ON)

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Willow's Place, Mission Services (Hamilton ON)

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A Safe Place (Whitehorse YK)

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West Central Women's Resource Centre (Winnipeg MN)

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Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (Vancouver BC)

From March 2019 - March 2021, we explored the daily operations of these programs, and the identities, experiences and barriers faced by program participants. We interviewed senior management at our partner sites; collected data on daily operations using a shared online administrative data tool; hosted focus groups with over 100 front-line staff and drop-in program participants; and developed and administered a survey with 225 drop-in program participants.



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# Policy Advocacy Message:

➡ In order to implement the **'human right to adequate housing'** for multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people, there is an urgent need to develop models of gender-specific, low-barrier housing that integrates safe, affordable, accessible and dignified homes with on-site supports, access to basic needs, intentional forms of community and meaningful opportunity for connection and social inclusion.



*This is Not Home* was able to learn about the existing models of practice and service delivery that make drop-ins accessible and relevant for multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people. While our work focused on low-barrier drop-in programs, we believe there are important lessons learned that could be applied to the development of new kinds of housing and support.

This includes integrating harm-reduction practices, relational and trauma-informed supports, community building and meaningful opportunities for participation, peer support and decision-making.

The gender-specific, low-barrier drop-in program is a sector that has already demonstrated tremendous capacity for meaningfully supporting multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people. In the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite reduced capacity and lockdown measures, five of our research sites hosted more than 32,000 visits, served more than 100,000 meals, and provided more than 11,000 harm reduction kits.

Through *This is Not Home* we were able to learn more about the identities and experiences of women and gender-diverse people who access low-barrier, gender-specific drop-in programs. Our findings confirmed that women and gender-diverse people who experience multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization, are accessing support through low-barrier, gender-specific drop-in programs.

Through our survey *This is Not Home* was able to develop a statistical portrait of the identities and experiences of drop-in program participants across our six study sites.

## WE FOUND:

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➡ Almost all respondents (99%) experience disability, and more than half (55%) reported three or more types of disabilities.

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➡ More than three quarters (76%) are survivors of trauma and abuse.

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➡ 41% reported having had encounters and interactions with the criminal justice system.

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➡ Nearly half (48%) of participants experience psychiatric or mental health challenges, and 42% of all participants reported issues with substance use and addiction.

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➡ Nearly half (41%) of all participants are Indigenous.

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➡ One in ten (10%) drop-in participants identify as trans or gender-diverse, which includes trans women, trans men, Two-Spirit, non-binary and genderqueer individuals.

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➡ Drop-in participants who are trans or gender-diverse, report actively using substances at a significantly higher rate than cisgender participants (67%).

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➡ Participants living with three or more disabilities are disproportionately impacted by trauma and abuse (85%) and were more likely to report experience with the criminal justice system (50%).

Low-barrier and gender-focused drop-in programs are vital for this population of women and gender-diverse people. Other existing housing and support services are not sufficiently meeting their needs.

*This is Not Home* was able to illuminate some of the barriers that multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people experience when attempting to access housing, shelter, health-care and other support services.

We asked participants about their experiences accessing support and services at other drop-ins, shelters and services.

We found that 35% of participants reported feeling that they did not belong in other drop-ins and shelter spaces. We also found that nearly a quarter of participants (24%) reported issues with staff (e.g. judgement and discrimination) when attempting to access other services.

**“When I was there (gender-specific, low-barrier drop-in program), the accessibility of the place, to be able to go and come freely, and the people were supportive. The staff didn’t make it hard.”**

**– PARTICIPANT**

We asked participants about their experiences accessing housing, and about the barriers they face in relation to attaining adequate and sustainable housing.

Our findings demonstrate that barriers to housing faced by multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people are unique. Remediating these barriers requires substantial investment in gender-specific, low-barrier models of housing and supports.

For example, we found that 29% of participants reported that past experiences of violence and trauma were a barrier to finding and sustaining housing, 24% of participants reported that discrimination (on the basis of gender, race, ability and income) was a barrier to accessing housing, and 19% reported that substance use and mental health prevented them from finding and sustaining housing.

When women and gender-diverse people did find housing, it was often unaffordable, lacked safety and was in poor condition. For example, nearly one-third (31%) of all participants who were currently housed, indicated that their housing felt unsafe. Over a quarter (26%) of participants who were currently housed were dealing with pests in their housing (including bedbugs, mice, rats and cockroaches), 25% were living somewhere that repairs were left incomplete and 20% were living somewhere too small for the number of people living there.

**“Women get housed by mental health agencies and other agencies, but lose their housing very quickly because there is not enough support.”**

#### **– FRONTLINE WORKER**

Findings from *This is Not Home* demonstrated that multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people face unique barriers when attempting to access housing and have housing and support needs that remain unmet in the current housing sector.

There is a need to re-think the ways we design housing and supports, so that we might be better able to adequately meet housing and support needs of multiply-marginalized women and gender diverse people.

The second phase of this project *Creating Home Together* applies the lessons learned from *This is Not Home* about the promising practice approaches used within the low-barrier gender-specific, drop-in program sector to inform the development of new models of housing and supports for multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people.

## OUR POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

We recommend that new models of housing and support for multiply-marginalized women and gender-diverse people be developed and adequately funded. We believe this model of housing should be developed by drawing on participatory approaches that include the lived expertise of women and gender-diverse people who access low-barrier, gender-focused drop-ins, and front-line workers who work in these settings.

*This is Not Home* highlighted that multiply marginalized women and gender-diverse people know what works for them and should be at the forefront of decision-making. We are advocating for increased participation of women and gender-diverse people who experience homelessness and marginalization in local and provincial stakeholder groups where decisions are being made as this will lead to more informed policy and program development.

We are calling on policy makers and those with decision-making power to adequately support low-barrier, gender-focused drop-ins, and increase their capacity to transition from homeless services to housing provision. Drop-ins and the women and gender-diverse people they serve, know what is needed to create housing and service models that will really work to end homelessness. But most of these organizations lack stable adequate funding, and face a steep learning curve and capacity gap in moving from emergency service provision to housing operation.

We recommend that the National Housing Strategy works with low-barrier, gender-specific drop-ins and their members, to build the knowledge, capacity, skills, networks, and funding they will need to realize their visions for inclusive, accessible, culturally-appropriate, low-barrier homes and communities.



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