

# Nowhere to Go: Confronting Canada's Housing Crisis and Advocating for Change for Survivors of Gender Based Violence

# Understanding Canada's Housing Crisis: By the Numbers

- 1.7 million households (11.2%) or 3.3 million individual in core housing need
- Over 118,000 people accessed emergency shelters in 2023 – 67.8% identified as men, 31.1% identified as women and 1.1% identified as gender diverse
- One in three GBV shelters reports turning people away
- Between 2021 and 2023 asking rents in Canada increased 23%

## **Now:**

- The national average rent is \$2,127
- The national average home price is \$679,866

# Understanding Canada's Housing Crisis: Key Drivers

- The federal government downloaded the responsibility for housing to the provinces in the 1990s
- This was part of a shift away from government investment in essential services
- The provinces rolled back tenant protections

**+ Low interest rates = housing became an attractive investment and housing prices increased significantly**

These systemic drivers directly shape the options, or lack thereof, available to survivors seeking safe housing.

# Understanding Canada's Housing Crisis: Key Drivers

## Today:

- One in six Canadian homeowners own multiple properties
- Institutional investors own an estimated 20% of our purpose-built rental stock
- High demand for housing

# The Housing Crisis is a Gendered Crisis

**Note:** We're using the term 'women+' here to reflect the language used by Statistics Canada, while recognizing that this includes trans, Two Spirit, and gender-diverse people who are impacted by housing insecurity and gender-based violence. Elsewhere in the presentation I will refer to women and gender diverse people.

## **Women experience a higher incidence of core housing need than men+:**

- 21% of women+ renters experience core housing need
- 18.8% of racialized women+ are in core housing need, compared to 8.5% of white women+
- 21% of lone-parent households headed by women+ are in core housing need
- 14.6% of women+ over 75 experience core housing need

In the housing crisis context, housing instability is both a cause and consequence of GBV.

# Who Else is Impacted Along Intersectional Lines?

**1.7 million households (11.2%) or 3.3 million individuals were in core housing need in 2022:**

- 22.1% of renter households compared to 6.1% of homeowner households experienced core housing need
- 18.3% of Black households, 27.7% of West Asian households and 26.9% of Korean households experience core housing need
- 17.9% of Indigenous households experience core housing need
- Senior women experience a higher incidence of core housing need than senior men

# Our Research on GBV and Housing Insecurity

**Our research employed an intersectional framework and set out to answer two key questions:**

1. Do high housing costs impede the ability of women and gender diverse people in Ontario to leave contexts in which they are experiencing GBV/IPV?
2. Do different housing market conditions and characteristics impact the ability to leave a domestic partnership in which an individual is experiencing GBV?

# Research Sites

- Toronto
- Ottawa
- Peterborough
- Thunder Bay
- Lanark County





# Research Methods

1. Literature review
2. Housing market conditions analysis of the five research sites
3. Survey of survivors who have experienced housing insecurity across the five research sites
4. Interviews with individuals working in service provision to survivors of GBV across the five research sites

# Key Finding: High Housing Costs

**79%**



- 79% of participating survivors shared that high housing costs were a barrier to leaving a context in which they were experiencing violence
- Survivors who leave are facing a high degree of housing insecurity that originates from their experiences of GBV
- This housing insecurity is compounded by Ontario's housing affordability crisis
- People working in service provision shared that they too experienced housing insecurity

# Key Finding: High Housing Costs

65%



- 65% percent of survey respondents reported experiencing further housing insecurity when they left emergency shelter
- Many survivors are returning to live in violent homes or end up in other precarious living arrangements



“My work used to be helping women leave, and now a lot of my work is helping women stay as safe as possible while they stay.”

– Frontline worker in a mid-sized or small community

"When you get into the shelter, our shelter, you get a three month stay. And years ago, we could at least work through that. Now in three months we're finding a whole lot of nothing. So not only when they come into my office, we start talking about your moving on plan almost instantly. We've really removed that space what we used to call 'the honeymoon' – the time where you get safe and get centered. We almost have to start talking about moving on plans right away now. And when they sit there in my office and we ask what's your budget. And we're talking about a budget of a mom who's on ODSP and she makes \$1,800 a month, she ain't finding anything. Nothing."

– Frontline worker in a mid-sized or small community

# Key Finding: Barriers Beyond Cost

**Survivors are also facing significant barriers to accessing private rental market housing beyond cost.**

**42%**



- Only 10% of survey respondents found housing in the private rental housing market
- 42% of survey respondents reported experiencing discrimination in searching for rental housing in the private market

# Key Finding: Barriers Beyond Cost

10%



- Only 10% of survivors surveyed reported accessing private rental market housing
- Onerous rental applications preclude survivors from accessing private rental market housing
- When survivors can access private rental market housing, interview participants shared that they are often faced with unaffordable and unsafe housing conditions



“Now, you have applications, where you also have to come up with references in the private market, and you also have to sign off on them checking your credit background. This is like, next to impossible for a lot of people who live up North, or are coming from rural areas, because, we know, the credit is going to be pretty shabby.”

– Frontline worker in a small or mid-sized community



# Key Finding: Intersectional Considerations

- Gaps exist in programming for people with disabilities, gender-diverse people, people who use substances, people who do not speak English, and people with other complex needs
- Not all shelters have the capacity to provide the supports that people with disabilities, people with significant mental health challenges and people who use substances need
- Meanwhile, a higher proportion of individuals trying to access services are presenting with disabilities, complex needs, and mental health challenges
- Housing outcomes for survivors are different along intersectional lines



"In that scenario, the landlord gets to interview three people, and then they get to pick their person. Our Indigenous clients never got picked. It was kind of debilitating. So, like here they are thinking, "oh, I might get housing." And they go through this and they're nervous about it. And they really never got picked."

– Frontline worker in a large city, on rent supplements/portable housing benefits.

"For non-binary and queer identifying clients, entering shelter is sometimes a very specific risk in terms of whether they want to be changing their gender presentation to increase safety."

– Frontline worker in a large city

# Key Finding: Existing Programming



- There are gaps in service availability or appropriate services for people with disabilities, gender diverse people, newcomers to Canada, Indigenous people and survivors with children
- These gaps are more acute in mid-sized, smaller and rural communities

# Key Finding: Existing Programming

- Provincial programming designed to prioritize access to social housing for survivors of GBV does not currently result in survivors being housed
- None of the survey respondents reported accessing social housing after leaving emergency shelter through the Special Priority Policy



“Poverty is policy in Ontario. All of our benefit rates and minimum wage rates are far below the poverty line.”

– Manager in a small or mid-sized community

“So special priority, rent geared to income, city housing – if you don’t have a fixed address, you can’t receive mail. [Redacted] Housing Corporation, as an example, sends a request to update every year. If you don’t update it, they remove you. So, I have women that have thought they’ve been on the list for years and haven’t been because they were removed.”

– Front line worker in a small or mid-sized community



“I had no family support when experiencing abuse; I asked about shelters but was told there was a two+ year waiting list; I also had a family pet to consider; I didn’t want to disrupt my children’s lives by moving them out of school, community, etc.; I had limited access to financial resources at the time that I needed to leave.”

– Survivor in a large city

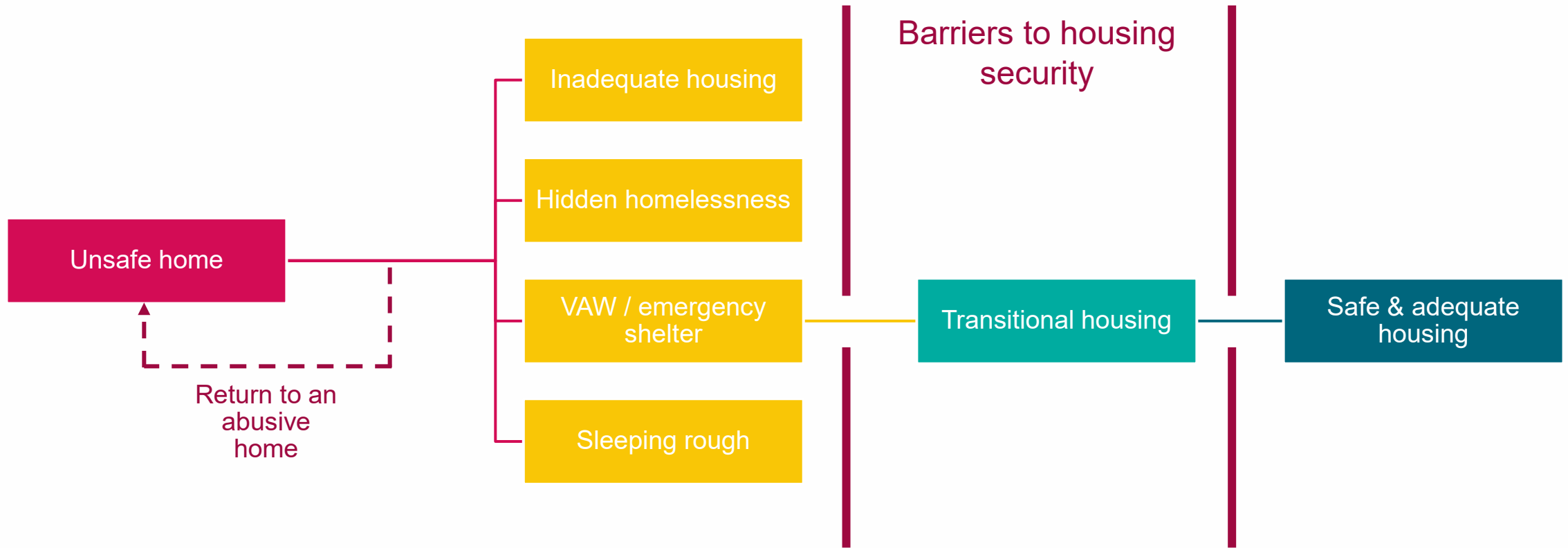
# Canada's obligation to uphold the right to housing of women+

## Obligations under international law

- ICESCR – right to adequate housing
- CEDAW – equal enjoyment of human rights, freedom from all forms of discrimination and access to shelters for GBV survivors
- ICERD – freedom from all forms of discrimination
- UNDRIP – self-determination in housing programs
- CRPD – right to live independently in the community and access to barrier-free housing

These obligations apply to **all** levels of governments.

# Gendered experiences of homelessness





# Addressing barriers to housing security for survivors of GBV

## Key Barriers

- Economic inequality
- Systemic discrimination
- Lack of deeply affordable housing
- Gaps in renter protections
- Lack of safe and adequate shelter services
- Lack of trauma-informed services and supports
- Restrictive pathways out of homelessness

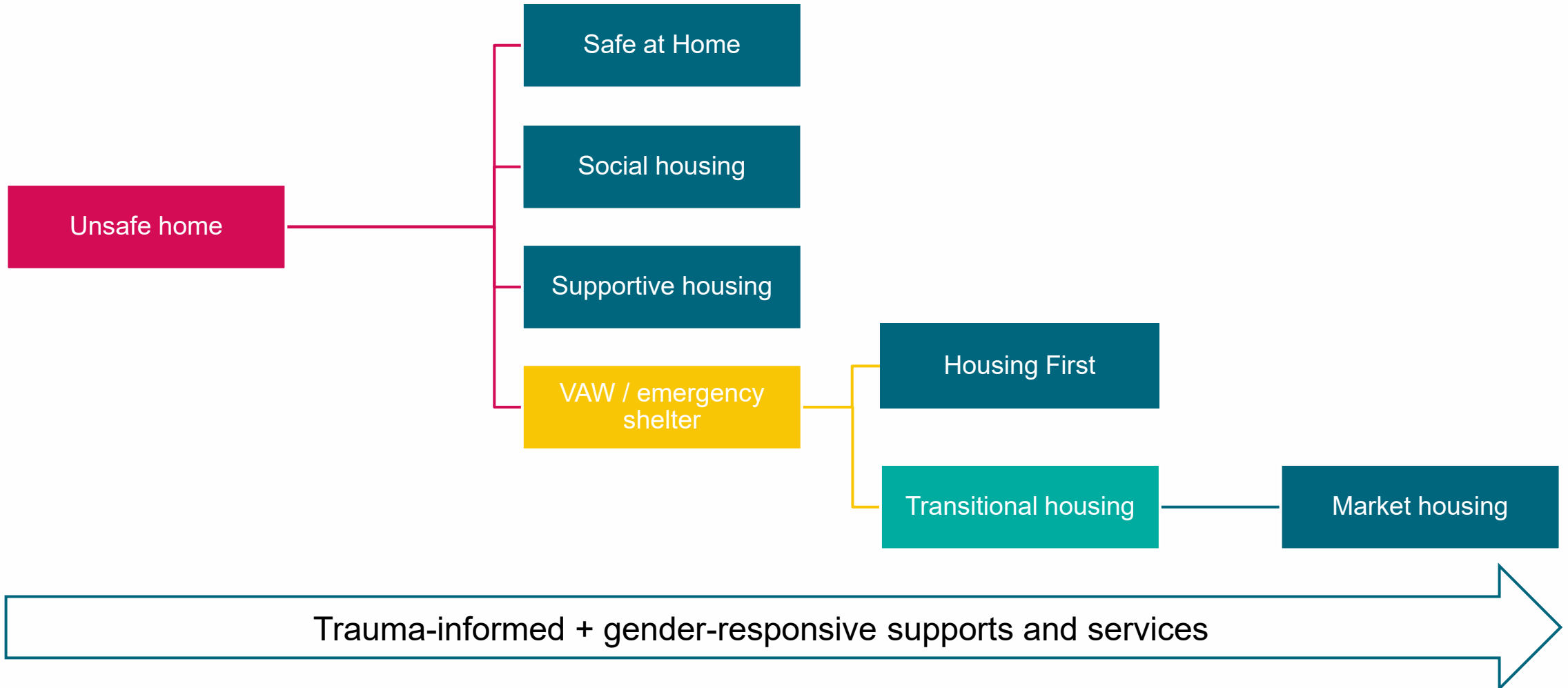
# Addressing barriers to housing security for survivors of GBV

## Unlocking the housing continuum

Housing security is paramount to GBV prevention:

- Upstream prevention – affordability measures and eviction prevention
- Homelessness reduction – safe shelter spaces and coordinated supports
- Downstream interventions – low-barrier access to stable housing and sustained supports
- Inclusive and decolonialist approaches throughout

# From housing insecure to safe at home



# Policy Recommendations

## All levels of government



- Prioritize investments in deeply affordable housing
- Adopt rigorous standards for the design of shelter spaces and services
- Investigate the nature and scope of discriminatory housing practices
- Establish robust monitoring, evaluation and accountability frameworks

# Policy Recommendations

## Federal government



- Adopt a definition of homelessness consistent with gendered experiences of homelessness
- Increase funding for the construction and repair of social, supportive and transitional housing options
- Reduce barriers to accessing social assistance, legal aid and subsidized housing
- Strengthen affordability requirements under the National Housing Strategy

# Policy Advocacy

## Federal government

- Second Review Panel on The right to housing for women, Two Spirit, Trans, and gender-diverse people – [Neha](#)
- Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network – [Community Organizer's Guide](#)
- Canadian Centre for Housing Rights – [Making a Submission to the Federal Housing Advocate](#)
- Endorse the Social Housing and Human Rights [Call to Action](#)
- Sign the [Open Letter](#) from the Demand Better campaign

# Policy Recommendations

## Provincial government



- Create emergency funding streams for eviction prevention that prioritize single mothers, women with disabilities and GBV survivors
- Amend residential tenancy laws to strengthen protections for GBV survivors
- Adequately resource access to justice mechanisms

# Policy Recommendations

## Provincial government



- Introduce Safe at Home programming and invest in Housing First programs
- Amend the Special Priority Policy application process
- Increase funding for the construction and repair of VAW, women's, 2SLGBTQQIA+ and Indigenous-led shelters
- Establish housing navigation services that are connected to other key sectors



# Policy Advocacy

## Provincial government

- Canadian Centre for Housing Rights – Engaging with Provincial and Territorial Governments
- Endorse the FairRent Ontario campaign
- Support and/or join the Encampment Justice Coalition

# Policy Recommendations

## Municipal government



- Amend zoning bylaws to increase the proportion of affordable and deeply affordable housing
- Establish maintenance standards and enforcement programs to prevent landlord neglect
- Increase funding to build shelters' capacity in delivering gender-responsive, culturally appropriate and trauma-informed services.

# Policy Advocacy

## Municipal government

- Canadian Centre for Housing Rights – Engaging with Local Governments
- Join a municipal Housing Advisory Committee – City of Toronto's Housing Rights Advisory Committee
- Engage with your City's Housing Commissioner/Ombudsman – Toronto Ombudsman Housing Oversight
- Mobilize your community and build your coalition:
  - CCHR – Empowering Communities to Claim the Right to Housing
  - Right to Housing Toronto

# Policy Recommendations

## GBV Sector



- Adopt a GBV prevention framework to support clients and employees
- Provide trauma-informed and culturally competent services
- Provide accessible and inclusive spaces
- Establish residents / users committees to ensure their equal participation in the decisions affecting them
- Build a vast referral network to help survivors find the supports they need
- Coordinate advocacy efforts to all levels of government

# Key Takeaways

- Housing security is essential to survivors' safety and dignity
- Conversely, GBV prevention is crucial to maintaining housing security
- There are both upstream and downstream solutions
- Coordinated action and collective advocacy are key to make these solutions a reality

# Thank you

# Keep in touch



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