

“How are people to focus on anything, besides trying to survive?”

RESULTS FROM A COMMUNITY SURVEY
ON ACCESS TO SAFE, GENDER-SENSITIVE SHELTERS



Until there is enough affordable housing across BC, everyone deserves access to safe emergency shelter.

Lack of access to safe shelter violates human rights and causes immense physical, mental health, and relational harms – harms experienced by more than 25,000 people each year across BC. In the context of BC’s housing crisis, lack of access to safe shelter directly contributes to gendered violence for women and people who face gender discrimination,¹ especially those also impacted by colonialism, racism, ableism, and other discrimination. Lack of housing is not only a barrier to leaving violence; it is also a common reason women return to violent situations.² Without safe housing or shelter, people are denied their rights to security, dignity, wellness, and full participation in their communities.

The safe shelter survey was co-designed by West Coast LEAF, SNOW, and people with experience of shelters in the Peace region as part of the [BC Gender Equality Report Card](#) project. The survey was administered by a peer survey team in Dawson Creek and Fort St. John, BC.³

“In the North, we have very extreme winters ... some people have had to wait for a bed to open up – possibly 3 to 4 days – meaning they were on their own to find help...”

- SURVEY PARTICIPANT

We thank everyone in Dawson Creek and Fort St. John, BC who shared their time, effort, and stories with us.

91 people completed our survey over two weeks in November 2023. 100% of survey respondents had personal experience with shelters, homelessness, and/or the negative impacts of housing precarity and lack of access to safe shelter. 41% of respondents were women or people of marginalized genders;⁴ 47% were men; 43% were Indigenous; and 32% identified as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Colour; or biracial or multiracial.

88% of respondents had experience staying at a shelter, contacting a shelter, or visiting a shelter. These included two co-ed shelters and four other emergency housing spaces in Fort St. John and Dawson Creek, and a total of 20 shelters across BC. This survey is only a snapshot. It does not capture the full scale of the issues and people affected.

“I assist with this because I have experienced this and love helping others. I know what it feels like. I’ve been there.”

- SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Our survey reveals how peers are helping each other in the face of government inaction.

In addition to their personal experiences with homelessness, shelters, and housing precarity, 96% of respondents had experience helping others with housing issues.

ACCESS

In Fort St. John and Dawson Creek there are not enough safe shelter spaces – especially for people who face discrimination based on gender and other factors.

Less than 15% of all respondents said there are usually enough shelter spaces for youth; people with pets; couples; women; Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary people; survivors of violence; people with children; and seniors. Respondents stressed the need for “diverse options” – including dedicated youth shelters and shelters for families; low barrier shelters that do not stigmatize substance use; and other options for those who need a substance-free environment. Lack of shelter during winters was a huge concern.

BARRIERS

Our findings highlight widespread barriers to accessing shelters.

Women and people of marginalized genders more often faced situations where a bed was available, but it was not safe or did not meet their needs. They also more often faced barriers like not being able to stay together with a partner (72%) and not being able to bring children to the shelter (68%). Indigenous⁵ respondents had encountered this latter barrier twice as often as non-Indigenous respondents.

“My sister is still homeless, with her children, and struggling with her mental health. She was leaving an abusive relationship. She pays night-to-night for hotels because she was refused services ... [there was] not enough room.”

- SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Among women and people of marginalized genders, very few said there are usually enough spaces for survivors, women, or Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary people:

Just **9%** felt there are enough spaces for people leaving violent situations

Just **10%** felt there are enough spaces for cisgender and transgender women

Just **15%** felt there are enough spaces for people who are Two-Spirit, trans, or non-binary

89% of women and people of marginalized genders reported that there are not enough shelter spaces to meet community needs.

“[There is] lack of space for women and their children; lack of space for women recovering from substance abuse; lack of overall safety! Please look to successful community models in addressing complex challenges... People with lived experience need to be involved and properly compensated for their involvement.”

- SURVEY PARTICIPANT

At least three out of four respondents who had contacted a shelter said they had encountered key barriers:

80% were turned away with no help finding other services / places that could help

78% said there was no bed available

75% said a bed was available, but it was not safe / did not meet needs

CONDITIONS

Shelters typically fail to meet basic standards related to dignity, health, and safety.

Even if a shelter bed is available, conditions in shelters are extremely poor and frequently unsafe. Respondents highlighted inadequate conditions across all the basic standards we asked about.

All respondents emphasized inadequate standards relating to privacy. Only 19% of women and people of marginalized genders said that shelter practices usually ensure residents' privacy.

“Women need to be safe when they sleep. Doors and safe spaces are integral to community safety, and saving lives.”

- SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Respondents also raised serious concerns about insufficient staff training, resources, and oversight to ensure shelters provide crucial services like nutritious meals, counselling and grief counselling, mental health crisis intervention, and overdose prevention. Many described a lack of transparency, invasive surveillance, and ambiguous rules – including arbitrary “banning” of people from the shelter. This occurred amidst pervasive stigma, judgement, and discrimination – e.g., against Indigenous people, those with mental health disabilities, people who use substances, and people of marginalized genders, including trans people.

“Peers don’t want to go to the shelter, because they do not feel safe... People are dying because there is no one trained to assist with overdoses, or mental health crises.”

- SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Respondents shared concerns about all types of shelters. But compared with conditions in co-ed shelters, women and people of marginalized genders twice as often said that conditions at women’s shelters and transition houses were “good” or “very good.” Still, more than 43% described conditions at women’s shelters as poor.

Only a quarter or fewer respondents said shelters usually meet the following standards:

Offered access to counselling and supports	25%
Residents treated with respect and dignity	25%
Supportive for people who had experienced violence or abuse	25%
Rules were fair and didn't discriminate	23%
Practices ensured residents' safety	20%
Had good measures to safely handle mental health crises	20%
Residents could stay as long as needed	16%
Residents were involved in deciding shelter rules and policies	9%

“I have seen racism towards Indigenous [people] at the shelter.”

- SURVEY PARTICIPANT

NOTES

¹ Including Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans people of all genders (not only women), queer, intersex, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people.

² For detailed facts and stats about gendered housing and homelessness in BC, see the BC Gender Equality Report Card: <https://westcoastleaf.org/work/gender-equality-report-card-2021-2022/>

³ For more information about the Safe Shelter Survey: <https://westcoastleaf.org/safe-shelter-community-survey>

⁴ Includes respondents who identified as: Indigenous or cultural gender; non-binary or gender fluid; and/or transgender.

⁵ Includes respondents who identified as: First Nations, Metis, or a different Indigenous identity.

IMPACTS

Lack of access to safe shelter causes harms and puts people in danger.

Our survey documented numerous harmful impacts caused by lack of access to safe shelter – including visible and hidden homelessness, health impacts, separation from family, loss of loved ones due to suicide, and safety risks.

Because of not having access to a safe shelter space, respondents:

Homelessness	Had to couch surf or stay in a crowded situation	74%
	Stayed somewhere unhealthy or unsafe	71%
	Stayed outside, in a tent, or in a vehicle	68%
	Stayed in a jail, hospital, or institution	39%
Health Issues	Used substances to cope with stress of no safe shelter	70%
	Had mental or physical health issues because of no safe shelter	65%
Relationship harms	Had to leave own community to find safe shelter**	46%
	Had to sleep separate from partner to access shelter	37%

** Indigenous respondents more often had to leave their own community to find safe shelter

Among women and people of marginalized genders: 62% had stayed in an unwanted or bad relationship to keep housing (this impacted 44% of men); 27% had done survival sex work, or traded sex for housing (this impacted 16% of men); 35% had worried about separation from kids due to no safe shelter (this impacted 21% of men); and 30% became separated from kids because of no safe shelter (this impacted 23% of men.) First Nations respondents more often worried about being separated from their kids because of not having safe shelter; and more often became separated from their kids due to no safe shelter.

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Calls for Action

Governments must fund pathways out of shelters into stable housing. Emergency shelters are urgently needed, but they are not a long-term solution to poverty and homelessness.

Governments must address systemic safety and human rights issues across BC's emergency shelter system:

- Ensure shelter spaces (e.g., sleeping spaces, storage, and bathrooms) are safe, secure, and private.
- Build and fund enough 24/7 shelters and safe spaces to meet all communities' needs.
- Ensure no one can be reported to the Ministry of Child and Family Development because they brought a child to a shelter.
- Ensure enough dedicated 24/7 spaces for people at risk of violence, or leaving violence – including people with children and pets.
- Ensure shelters do not discriminate (based on factors like gender, race, Indigenous identity, substances, immigration, or mental health).
- Ensure shelter staff are trained in trauma-informed and violence-informed practice, de-escalation, and mental health first aid.
- Ensure shelters offer wrap-around services like counselling and grief counselling, sexual assault services, harm reduction, and overdose prevention.
- Fund enough shelters that are culturally safe for Indigenous people.
- Hire peer navigators and people with lived experience to work at shelters.
- Create shelter monitoring committees of people with lived experience.
- Ensure shelter residents have input into gender-sensitive shelter design, rules, and policies.