On the edge: Exploring homeless women’s social networks

By
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A thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

MA Program in Social Justice and Equity Studies
BROCK UNIVERSITY
St. Catharines, Ontario

August 2007

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Abstract

This thesis aims to uncover the ways that previously homeless women in the Niagara region are able (or unable) to rely on friends, family and service providers in times of crisis (homelessness and poverty). Eleven women were interviewed and their experiences indicate that social networks cannot take the place of comprehensive and inclusive social policy. Time and time again, their stories showed that they were left negotiating the detritus of neo-liberal policies.
Acknowledgements

There are many people who had a part in my getting to the stage that I am able to write a thank you in an MA thesis. I am lucky to have great networks to rely on and I am truly thankful for them. I will be brief here, but a great many people deserve my special thanks.

I would first like to acknowledge my thesis committee, Dr. Kate Bezanson and Dr. June Corman. I appreciate your time and help – you’ve made it possible for other people to understand my analysis and pushed me to take it farther. Dr. Mary-Beth Raddon and Dr. Meg Luxton, thank you for your support and confidence in my abilities to do this project. I have enjoyed working with you both and want to recognize your contributions. Thank you to Dr. David Butz and Dr. Jane Helleiner for your work (and support) as program directors. I appreciate your time and input as my external reviewer, Dr. Ester Reiter.

Thank you to the women who so generously and bravely opened their lives to me and shared their experiences, this project would not be possible without your help and your courage. To the shelter staff who taught me about how the service provider world works and changed my perceptions about service providers being ill-willed...I am glad you’ve changed my perspective, and pleased that we became friends.

Brock has been an institution that has helped me grow up as a person and a student. I attribute that to the wonderful people there. Thank you to my classmates that made coursework, writing and rethinking grad school somehow more bearable. Heather Maguire and Allison Jenson – thank you for pulling me through with Winston. Linda Landry and Jill DeBon you’ve made the last three years easy on me. Thank you.

Kate, (again) I am not sure where to begin. Thank you for making me feel like I am part of your people. You are a big brain and I hope to be half as impressive as you one day. Thank you for your patience and your guidance (and giving me a job when I thought I should go to college).

And last but certainly not least, I have a wonderful family and great group of friends that were supportive while I toiled away at this project. I can’t begin to thank you enough – you know who you are. Thank you for believing in me. You have proved that one’s networks can be of the utmost importance in the proper circumstances. You’re all good.
Dedication
This thesis is written for all the women who have similar experiences to the ones outlined here. I dedicate this to the women who allowed me into their lives and let me interview them. A special very thank you to ‘Heather’ – I want nothing but the best for you and will root for you no matter what. Always.
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<td>Ontario Works</td>
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<td>ODSP</td>
<td>Ontario Disability Support Program</td>
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<td>CTC</td>
<td>Child Tax Credit</td>
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<td>FACS</td>
<td>Family and Children Services</td>
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<td>CAS</td>
<td>Children’s Aid Society</td>
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<td>EI</td>
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<td>AA</td>
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CHAPTER ONE

I remember the first time I saw someone lying on the cold street, I thought, "I can't just walk past here, this just can't be true." But I learned by example to just keep moving my feet. It's amazing the things that we all learn to do. (DiFranco 2001)

Introduction

I was driven to do this research because I am motivated to alter the dynamics of women's poverty. I wanted to explore both how to lessen negative stereotypes about homeless women and how to reduce homelessness through policy change. I am interested in women's poverty for personal reasons related to my own history and for political reasons because I believe that poverty should be alleviated in order to increase equality. From a personal standpoint, I see where my life might have gone if I had had weaker social networks (family and friends) and had made a few different choices. I struggled on minimum wages\footnote{I worked at a number of typical low wage jobs including at fast food restaurants, as a department store cashier, a hotel cleaner, and a student pub waitress among other positions.} with less than a high school education for many years before I was able to overcome obstacles that made leaving those jobs and pursuing my education a possibility. As a teenager, I worked alongside a number of women in dead-end jobs who were unable to make ends meet or care adequately for their children, despite their best efforts. At the time, I did not see the struggles they had as collective problems; rather I understood them as individual ones that were due to issues with scheduling or poor choices. In retrospect, I see that the structure of the labour market generally and these positions specifically (including no health benefits, being scheduled less than 30 hours a week, shift work, low wages etc.), made survival difficult. The women I worked with
were not exceptions to the rule. The struggles many poor people face have become increasingly difficult in the last decade.

I have become aware throughout this research process that although I am currently financially stable, I could change places with the women who are served by agencies such as the shelter in which I met my participants. From the first-hand accounts of women living in poverty, I understand that these women are intelligent and resourceful but unable to overcome the obstacles of inadequate housing, insufficient hours and low pay at their places of employment, unavailable childcare and little hope of subsidies and government benefits. Many of us are far closer to becoming homeless than is comfortable to admit. The combination of an often non-standard labour market, unaffordable housing, and lack of savings make poverty a chronic and widespread problem.

Women are the subject of this project because they are typically positioned as the caregivers and the social centers of families. The feminization of poverty also contributes to the decision to interview women. Many women live in poverty, struggle in low wage jobs, and face family violence. In addition to these issues, women are often invisible as homeless people and are in a disadvantaged position in relation to men in general.


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2 This is less true now that I hold a BA and have an extensive work history.
3 Many families that pay a large portion of their income to rent are one crisis or a few paycheques away from being completely homeless (http://www.cahhalifax.org/DOCS/swinging.pdf).
among others), but there are few Canadian case studies that explore both social networks and the effects that government policies (such as Ontario Works, subsidies, child-care etc.) have on women. My research addresses this gap.

I started to develop this project three years ago in between my undergraduate and graduate degrees. I began volunteering at a local crisis housing shelter because I wanted to apply the knowledge about poverty, gender and policy I had gleaned during my undergraduate studies. Through my volunteer and paid work\textsuperscript{4} at the shelter\textsuperscript{5}, I came to see patterns in the ways that women became homeless and the ways they navigated their way out of homelessness. There were common experiences and these patterns provide a starting point for informing social policy.

The women who come through the shelter doors in the Niagara branch I studied do not fit into a neat category, but come from all walks of life. The majority of shelter guests\textsuperscript{6} are white and between 20 and 50 years of age (the study respondents represent this as well with seven out of eleven of the women fitting that description). There are periods when more teenage women come to the shelter (especially during the summer months and the beginning of the school year). Many of the clients are dealing with addictions or leaving abusive relationships. The economic situations of the women are varied as well; some women arrive at the shelter with jobs (from manual labour to professional work and low wage to high salary positions), some women are leaving

\textsuperscript{4} I worked for two years as a front line service provider (titled an advocate) at a shelter. I listened to the guests, referred them to other agencies, informed them about supports available to them and enforced the shelter rules.

\textsuperscript{5} I worked at a crisis and homeless shelter that can house up to 25 women and children in the Niagara region. The shelter is funded by a number of grants, donations and through the hostel agreement through Ontario Works (discussed further in chapter three).

\textsuperscript{6} The shelter uses the term ‘guest’ for clients.
situations where they were dependent on a male breadwinner, some women receive
government assistance as their source of income and some women come without any
income at all. Ontario Works (a provincial social assistance program) pays for the shelter
bed through the Hostel Agreement (please see chapter three for more details) and
typically the women are able to stay at the shelter for a period of up to thirty days. During
the time they spend at the shelter, the women often need referrals to counseling, help
finding employment and transportation, and guidance finding affordable housing or
housing programs.

Women who come to the shelter often return after their stay is over seeking
companionship and continuing contact with staff advocates. I have spent countless hours
listening to women and watching the ways that they interact with each other while trying
to rebuild their lives. There are few formal supports available to the women in the shelter.
The popular discourses of family as a refuge, and solution to social exclusion exacerbate
the situation of the interviewed women. My initial thoughts were that the public policy
interest in social capital might be a good lens for analyzing women’s homelessness.
Recent literature suggests that relying heavily on kin and friendship networks strains and
harms the most important relationships in people’s lives, rather than strengthens them
(Luxton in Bezanson & Luxton 2006; Bezanson 2006). This research will test this claim,
especially for people who have frequent crises. For homeless women, crises are often
frequent and support networks are a crucial part in managing through difficult times.

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7 These relationships are able to flourish because I usually work the night shift so women
are able to find me alone and therefore appear to feel more comfortable self-disclosing.
8 Social capital is a term that is used to describe the benefits of a person’s networks and
alliances. It has become an area of interest for many policy makers (Bezanson and Carter
2006).
I located this study in the Niagara region because many women in the area face poverty and homelessness. The Niagara region has not recovered from the loss of its industrial base in the 1990s. It also has high rates of poverty and ill health\(^9\). The effects of the loss of industrial jobs in this region are intensified because minimum wage jobs in the tourist sector have replaced high paying ones. High illiteracy rates are another feature of the population of the Niagara region\(^10\), serving as a significant barrier to employment. Due in part to its geography and multiple urban centers (Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, Welland etc.) this is a poor and under-serviced region of Ontario. It lacks sufficient infrastructure and supports in areas such as inter-municipal public transportation, childcare, medical doctors, addiction services, and affordable housing. There are often waiting lists at shelters and not enough food on the shelves at food banks. Shelter use in the area increased by 220% from 2001 to 2004 and approximately 8500 people are on the waiting list for subsidized housing in the Niagara Region, with wait times of five to seven years (Social Housing Strategy 2004). This region is facing a serious crisis in homelessness and poverty. This is the context in which this research takes place.

The thesis unfolds as follows. The second chapter outlines the reasons that qualitative research methods were employed, explores the feminist goals of this research and raises the problems of this research design. I offer a brief life history for each of the participants. In the third chapter, I explore the political and historical context in which this research was developed. In this chapter, the Ontario policy context is explored. A

\(^10\) 2005 statistics from Frontier College show that 21% of Canadians cannot read whereas Literacy Link Niagara stated 60% of the Niagara region is functionally illiterate (meaning one cannot function in a highly literate job). Statistics Canada 1995 indicates the Niagara Region has a high level of illiteracy.
gendered approach to Canadian political economy is discussed. I outline the literature about social capital, social networks and friendship, which serve as a lens for this project.

In the three data analysis chapters, the words of the women describe their experiences. Chapter four examines family social networks and shows how these women have not been able to rely on their families for stable social support. The women describe the ways in which they would have liked to rely on their families when they were in crisis and the ways that they are able to ask for help from them. Many of the women have a general disappointment about their kin relationships; they felt rejected when they were not able to access help from family. Respondents' experiences illuminate the limits of family as the main provider of support for people in crisis. I examine how these women have come to understand family and the discourse they use about caring work in family terms.

In chapter five, I explore the ways that the women discuss their other social networks. These networks include social service providers, friends and other people whom the women have met while staying at the shelter. Many of the women make comments about other women as undeserving of aid or frame their lack of support in terms of other people seeing them as undeserving. Therefore, this section deals with the discourse of deserving and undeserving poor with which many of the women struggle. The women indicated that they felt they were different from the other guests at the shelter and often denied that they had been homeless.

Chapter six focuses on the gaps that the women identified in services and public policies. I have analyzed the responses the interviewees gave when answering a question about what politicians and policy makers need to know about the experience of being
homeless. I have augmented the women’s voices with policy recommendations of my own that address the concerns of women living on the margins, dealing with poverty and homelessness.
CHAPTER TWO

“Ask a question and you’re a fool for three minutes; do not ask a question and you’re a fool for the rest of your life” Chinese Proverb

Methods

This thesis explores the social networks of women in the Niagara region who have experienced homelessness to examine the function of women’s social networks during times of crisis. It asks: in what ways are these relationships with kin, friends and service providers helpful or detrimental to the situation of homeless women?

Homelessness is often the outcome of a series of crisis. Through in-depth interviews, respondents described a series of problems that existed simultaneously with their experience of homelessness. It is because of the concurrent nature of a variety of problems that I have used the term ‘life crises’ as an umbrella for all the barriers the women described to me instead of focusing only on housing or poverty. Homelessness is often the outcome of a series of crises and therefore an inclusive term is useful.

Qualitative research methods were employed as a way to examine the lived realities of women as they experience and give meaning to life crises. This project is rooted in feminist methodologies, and therefore it was important that the respondents be able to have some control over the levels of personal self-disclosure. My aim was to have a participant-driven conversation. Feminist scholars note that a central aim of interviewing is to give voice to the participant, especially because women’s voices have been marginalized and women’s experiences have been undervalued (Esterberg 2002, Reinharz 1992). “In-depth interview[ing] uses individuals as the point of departure for the research process and assumes that individuals have unique and important knowledge about the social world that is ascertainable through verbal communication” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006 pg 119). Further, feminist interviewing uses the starting point that the
interviewer is not necessarily the expert and that the respondent has valuable insight into the workings of the world. Feminist methods, then, are important to my study because they permit marginalized respondents to elaborate on homelessness and offer their perspectives on social policy and moral regulation.\(^\text{11}\)

**The project**

This research reports on data gathered from eleven in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with women who have been guests at a local crisis housing shelter for women and children. The goal of the interviews was to examine how the interviewed women could draw on their networks and to explore to whom they turned in times of crisis. An interview guide and interview questions were drawn up and included areas such as connections to community, employment, living arrangements, experience of asking for help, and what led up to them becoming homeless.\(^\text{12}\) During the interviews, the women disclosed a great deal about experiences that were not directly tied to the topic of homelessness and social networks. Following Berg (2001), my intention was to use the interview guide only as needed, and to focus on generating questions and probe from the participant’s responses. I was able to be open to hear the participant’s explanations and digressions as well (Berg 2001, Bouma 2001). Open-ended questions were important in order to allow the participants to share the role of their personal networks in terms of their experience of homelessness and navigating the shelter system.

Resulting from conversations during night shifts, many of the women I interviewed were aware that I planned to conduct a project of this nature. This led past guests to

\(^{11}\) See Little (1998) for an excellent review of the moral regulation single mothers, and especially single mothers receiving assistance face.

\(^{12}\) Often this is an area where participants were able to tell me on whom they wished they could rely but were unable for a variety of reasons.
inquire (frequently) if the interviews were being conducted and if they could participate in the project. The sample is purposeful based on convenience and the impossibility of having a sample that would be representative of all the women that have used the shelter. It is beyond the scope of this project to ask certain women who fulfilled a certain criteria (such as age, ethnic group identification, reason for coming to the shelter) to participate in the research. For ease of recruitment and to avoid ethical issues tied to my dual status as researcher and shelter staff, participants were asked to self-select. Participants were recruited through posters placed in the shelter by the shared computer, on the front desk (where the women came into the shelter and stopped by to pick up phone messages) and by the payphone in the lobby (please see Appendix A for the invitation) of the shelter. The invitation medium (text based information) presented some problems based on literacy, but the women in the shelter discussing the posters openly with each other offset them. Potential participants were given a phone number and an email address to contact me to indicate their desire to participate, although often the women approached me during a night shift at the shelter. If approached while working, I would take the appropriate contact information and set up interview times and answer any questions during a time when the role between service provider and researcher would not be blurred. The criteria for being a participant were as follows;

1. one must be a woman over 18 years old,
2. one must be a past guest of the facility and not be a current guest of the facility,
3. one must be willing to talk about their networks and their time at the shelter.

The first people to self-select were interviewed. There were some women who wanted to be a part of the research who were not included due to scheduling conflicts, current
residence in the shelter, indicating interest long after the interviews had been completed, or because they were not 18 at the time of the potential interview.

Participants were asked to choose a place that was convenient and safe for them to talk about their networks and experiences of homelessness. Six of the eleven women invited me to conduct the interview in their homes, three women asked to do the interview in restaurants or coffee shops and one woman selected a park as her safe space to talk. All of the participants were read the consent form and subsequently signed it (see appendix B). The women were given an honorarium of $10 for participating and I covered costs of bringing (or buying at the restaurant) beverages and snacks to the interview. Some of the women declined the honorarium, stating that they hoped that more people could participate in the research and stated that they felt this particular research was of value and needed more funding. The women were told that additional money would be available for childcare expenses, but none of the participants needed to take advantage of that offer.

The interviews were taped with the consent of the participants. The tapes were transcribed after the interviews were complete. All of the women were given the option to read over or listen to their interviews after the researcher had transcribed them; four of the women decided they would like to review the interviews. The women who asked to go over their transcripts were contacted by phone and email in order to set up meetings to go over the interview data. One woman asked that she be able to have a copy of her tape to listen to and declined reading the transcript. When the women were given their transcripts, they were often embarrassed by the way that they spoke during the interview and some women expanded on their experience at that time.
The women were asked to choose a pseudonym for their transcripts. Except for names that did not hide the participant’s identity well, the women’s choices of pseudonyms were used. I also stripped the transcripts of other identifying information such as places of employment. The interviews were read multiple times in order to become familiar with the data. It was important to listen not only to what was said, but how it was said. The informal conversation in normal language makes it possible to learn about the day-to-day lives and the happenings in the respondents’ lives (DeVault 1999). The data was open coded at that point with key words from the respondent’s interviews. After the interviews had been coded, the codes were examined for overall themes. The themes then became the basis for the data chapters presented here. It should be noted that the transcripts have been typed out as the words were spoken and whenever possible, the words of the women have been used to explain their experiences in this thesis.

The respondents were already comfortable with me as a person and then as a researcher. Much of what was discussed during the interview process was previously shared knowledge due to the established networks and history from the shelter. Due to that trust and background, often the women self disclosed in a way that might not have been possible with another researcher. These women have built trust with me during their time at the shelter. Often these women are expected to produce their life stories on a whim to any service provider who demands it, in order to be eligible for services. I was struck when I first started working at the shelter at the level of self-disclosure\textsuperscript{13} that was present and over time I began to understand the openness through the lens of the women.

\textsuperscript{13} When I began working at the shelter, I was guilty of making judgements about the social skills of the clients in the shelter based on their tendencies to tell many people information that I deemed very private and personal.
taking ownership of their life histories and sharing their experiences with whomever they chose instead of having it dictated to them. This project allowed the women the opportunity to guide the discussion in ways that are not usually possible in their interaction with service providers.

Due to the sensitive nature of the interview topics, the participants were offered referrals to a number of services in the area including the crisis nurse, local shelters, and relapse-prevention programs if they appeared to be in distress. Many of the participants took time after the interview to debrief about the process with me and then at the local shelter with other guests or staff. Many of the respondents were curious about my goals and how I felt about what they had disclosed during the interview. Although I had taken precautions to keep the identity of the participants hidden from the other guests and staff at the shelter, almost all of them talked openly about the interview experience to those people.

**Problems with the method**

During the writing process, problems emerged with the methodology as initially conceived. In retrospect, I understand this project as using a positivist approach, albeit unconsciously. Although I had planned to use semi-structured interviews, there are many times during the conversations that the interview guide was used rigorously. There are problems with the data based on the shared knowledge before the interviews\(^\text{14}\). Often during the interview there were missed opportunities for excellent follow up questions because I did not see the information that was disclosed to me as new information, which

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\(^{14}\) As stated earlier, many of the respondents were regulars at the shelter and often call the staff to update us on their lives. There were a lot of questions that felt awkward or trivial because the answers were so obvious to both parties.
meant that I allowed some emotional disclosures to pass without comment. Part of my motivation was to avoid injecting my own interpretations into the interview data, but in reality, often I sounded emotionally distant from the respondent. Reinharz discusses the responsibility of an interviewer, in that s/he must be able to respond to a person’s feelings: “I wonder if my own concern as a woman with people’s feelings about what they do have made me somewhat more sensitive to the greater ability of women to express those feelings” (1999 pg 20). Although I am sensitive to those feelings during my regular interactions with these women, I did not show that in a clear way during the interviews. This was a product of being transformed by work at the shelter\textsuperscript{15}. There is a tension in method here. I wanted to ask the same questions in order to have some reference point to start a comparison but was also interested in hearing the individual stories. My aim was to produce data that I could control so I could see the patterns in women’s experience, but that meant that I missed the opportunity to learn more about the individual respondent’s coping strategies.

\textbf{The participants}

The participants who were involved in the research are all past guests of a local crisis shelter in the Niagara region. They appeared to enjoy the process of being interviewed and stated that they were happy to be able talk about their problems with service providers and feelings of being mistreated. Eleven women were interviewed and are introduced here. Over half of the women identified addiction issues as problems that

\textsuperscript{15} There is a break between the theoretical perspectives that I have learned through my studies and the lived practices that the shelter employees actually employ. I had become desensitized to the stories that the women would tell me and was looking at this research project from a service provider’s perspective at times. It is problematic that this has happened because when I started at the shelter I was struck by how it reflected Mullay’s (2002) theories of oppression in social work (see chapter three).
had propelled them to the shelter in some way. Four respondents cited family breakdown as the catalyst to becoming homeless. Many of the participants dealt with the layered issues of mental health diagnoses, poor education, and lack of good social networks.

These are the participants.

Heather is a 39-year-old woman who has been to the shelter a number of times. She is a white woman with a grade 12 education. She is a recovering addict who has had a number of relapses since she came to the city. Heather came to the shelter from the local women’s detoxification center. Heather relocated to this area based on the belief that she would die if she stayed in the city she lived in due to her excessive drug use and her contacts with drug dealers there. Heather’s parents (who are alcoholics) drove her to this area when they heard there was room in the detoxification center. Heather has four children, two whom were living independently and two who were in the care of family members and Family and Children’s Services when she was interviewed. Heather was working for the time between living at the shelter until a few months after her interview. Her employment started through an employment agency but at the time of the interview she worked full time and although she was no longer a resident, she relied heavily on the shelter for her social and emotional support. She stated that she could not rely on anyone in her family. Heather went to the shelter on a daily basis and stated that the shelter staff was like her family. Heather did a lot of volunteer work at the shelter and often ate her meals there as well. Since her interview, Heather has relapsed and tried to take her life. Her second eldest child was released from Family and Children’s Services care and she subsequently moved into her mother’s rented room in a student house. Heather began actively using drugs again when her ex-boyfriend was released from jail and showed up
at her apartment. Heather just recently lost her job, her apartment, and is facing criminal charges due to being with her ex-boyfriend when he was caught breaking the law. Heather calls me and another staff person every few days in what appears to be an attempt to remind herself of how far she had come. She does not expect to live for very long and does not wish for any support to make life changes at this time.

Sara is a white woman in her early twenties who lives with her grandparents. She has a grade 11 education and states that she plans to go back to school eventually. She is displeased with the opportunities available to her in the region and in the city in particular. Sara came to the shelter when her long-term, live in girlfriend split up with her. Sara does not work and has no dependents. Sara is able to rely on her extended family for support but has no contact with her parents and often chooses not to rely on her family due to issues of pride. Sara also makes a distinction between people who live downtown and in other parts of the city, indicating that those who live downtown are unreliable and just want to party. Sara stated in her interview that people cannot trust anyone and need to learn to rely on themselves in order to get by. Sara appeared to be hung over in her interview and had trouble answering all of the questions.

Mickey is a 47-year-old white woman who is a recovering alcoholic and addict. Mickey lived in the region many years ago as a street person and accessed social services as an alcoholic, addict and prostitute at that time. She moved back to the Eastern provinces and continued that life course until she decided to return to this region seven years ago in order to end her life here. Mickey believed that she would come to the area and kill herself, but stated that the right people found her and she went into recovery instead. It was at that time that she finished her equivalency to grade 12 education, which
makes her very proud. Mickey came to the shelter seven years ago when she was sobering up and lived without alcohol for five years. Mickey relapsed and has returned to the shelter a number of times and used the shelter’s transitional housing at the time of the interview. She worked full time for three years and has recently left her job due to health reasons. Mickey has a tumultuous relationship with family and cannot depend on them emotionally or financially due to geography and strained ties. Mickey states that she has trouble in social situations and therefore does not feel that she can rely on friends for aid. She also indicated that she has trouble asking for help. Mickey self-identifies as a person who is there for other people and wishes that she could do more for other people in her situation. Mickey relied on traditional understandings of deserving versus undeserving poor and was very hard on other people (during the interview) who needed to use social services. Mickey has moved into permanent assisted housing since her interview and appears to be doing very well.

Donaghy is a 47-year-old woman who relocated to the region due to her perceptions about the quality of social services available to people with addictions in the area. Donaghy has two teenage children who live with her husband with whom she is in the process of separating. Donaghy is on sick leave from a full time job and plans to return to that position part-time as soon as possible. She has a large extended family and she is trying to rebuild relationships with them but states that she has pride issues that make it impossible for her to turn to them for financial support or to live with them. Donaghy experiences family pressure to move in with family and to return to her hometown but sees that as detrimental to her recovery at this time. She had recently completed a long-term treatment program (at the time of the interview) that she believes
has changed her life. Donaghy has had a number of relapses since her stay at the shelter
and is away a lot from the transitional housing unit that she lives in. It was unclear where
Donaghy would go after her year at the apartment passes. Since the time of the interview
Donaghy relapsed and was asked to leave the transitional housing. I am unsure where she
is at this time.

Tabitha is a 40-year-old, self identified Black woman. She has major health
concerns that she is avoiding (cancer) because she believes that she has a responsibility to
the people who are relying on her to work and provide care for them. She has three
teenage daughters. Two of her daughters live independently of her (at the time of the
interview) but rely heavily on her for support, both emotional and financial. Tabitha has a
history of violence and abuse that makes it impossible for her to rely on her family for
support. She worked full time at the time of the interview and planned to quit her job to
seek medical treatment in the near future. Tabitha has completed some university and
would like to return to school one day. Tabitha has a number of family concerns that
make her problems of homelessness more serious. She has traveled from shelter to shelter
for the better part of a year based on her daughter’s involvement as a witness in a
criminal case that makes it unsafe for the family to remain in their home. Since the
interview, Tabitha’s living arrangements have become more precarious as her middle
child was evicted from her apartment and moved in with Tabitha and her eldest child
(and grandchild) has also become more reliant upon Tabitha. At the time of writing,
Tabitha had returned to an out of town shelter and her two daughters were being evicted
from their mother’s apartment.
Tracy is a 51-year-old white woman who described herself as having had it all in the past. She is divorced and has a number of serious health concerns including diabetes, mental health issues and extreme pain from a prior car accident. Tracy is receiving Ontario Works and has an application in for Ontario Disability Support Program based on the above-mentioned health concerns (but she has been waiting to have her file looked at for five months). Tracy has two grown children but only one of them will speak to her. Tracy stated that under extreme circumstances she would be able to ask one son for a loan of small amounts of money (knowing that she cannot pay it back anytime soon) but that is the most that she could rely on family for. She feels unable to rely on her parents because of their advanced age and poor health, but wishes that she could rely on them emotionally and financially. Tracy has been unable to rely on her extended family for any type of support, which has been particularly troublesome for her because of their wealth and the closeness they used to have. Tracy has had a number of roommates and living arrangements in the recent past, which have made her a frequent visitor at the shelter and has put her in touch with a worker at Ontario Works for difficult cases. She is concerned about the reliability of the assistance cheque she receives if she is seen as a troublemaker. Tracy would like to work in the social service field and states that her home was the one that all of the neighbourhood kids used to congregate at because she would help them and listen to them. In the time since Tracy’s first time at the shelter she has lived in the Supporting Community Programs Initiative (SCPI), an apartment with mould that affected her breathing, in an apartment where her landlord was spying on her, at a friend’s house, outside and now in the room she is renting. Tracy is still optimistic that she will be able to find a good job and move away from a life of uncertainty.
June is a 38-year-old white woman renting a room in a house. She came to the shelter following her divorce when she had nowhere else to go. June is diagnosed bipolar and takes medication to manage that illness. June has a young son who does not live with her, whom she can visit when allowed by the person caring for her son. She is attending a college prep/basic life skills course at a local college but is not sure what she would like to do with it once she has finished. June receives Ontario Works and has a partner on Ontario Works as well. They planned to move in together in the near future at the time of the interview. June has a relationship with her brother and father but does not speak to her mother. June is able to rely on her family for some emotional support and occasionally borrows money from her father but it was not an option for her to move in with either of them when she was going through a housing crisis. June was very reserved in the interview (perhaps because her boyfriend remained in the room while the interview took place). June’s divorce has been finalized since the interview took place and her boyfriend has moved into her room.

Stephanie is a 19 year old, white, single mother of one. She has an eight-month old son who is bi-racial. She has a grade 10 education and was planning to return to school the week after the interview was completed. Stephanie was on maternity leave at the time of the interview from a full-time job at a call centre. Stephanie first came to the shelter from the psychiatric ward of the hospital when she was 16 years old and since then has gone through transitional housing, shelter time, a small amount of jail time and couch surfing. She is now in subsidized housing with her son. Stephanie is able to rely on her extended family for emotional support and help with her son but does not speak to her mother. Stephanie stated that the baby’s father helped with his care sporadically.
Stephanie indicated that she was not very connected to her community and that she wanted to leave subsidized housing as soon as possible.

Michelle is a 22-year-old white, bi-sexual woman. She is a recovering addict/alcoholic with 18 months clean time. She first came to the shelter when she was trying to get sober from her addictions. She has a history of relapsing, returning to the shelter, finding housing, crashing with friends on so on. Michelle states she has plenty of people to whom she could turn with emotional issues and indicated that she had a strong relationship with her family, immediate and extended. While she believed she could move in with family or borrow items from them, she was hesitant to do so when it enabled her to continue using drugs. She had pride issues that made it impossible for her to rely on others for support in times of crisis. Michelle had a sporadic employment history as well and was returning to work after being on sick leave from a full time position. Michelle relies on her friends heavily and most of her social circle revolves around her Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Often her friends/roommates relapse and her proximity to them puts her in precarious and dangerous situations. Since the interview Michelle has had to leave her job, was evicted from her apartment because she did not receive her record of employment in a timely manner and therefore could not get her Employment Insurance monies. Michelle has returned to the shelter.

Chloe is a 19-year-old white woman who is currently finishing her last year of high school. Chloe came to the shelter because of a family crisis. Her family (mother and brother) moved here from another province and moved in with her grandparents. Chloe’s mother went back out West in order to find housing and the family split up. She was
unable to continue living in the grandparent's home and relied on teachers from her school to find her a safe place to stay, which ended up being the shelter. Chloe felt it was impossible to rely on family members for help because of distance and finances and therefore felt that shelter staff and teachers were the equivalent to her family. Chloe had lived in a number of problematic situations including roommate situations where she was evicted and another where her roommate became violent. At the time of the interview, she was living in a single parent family, paying rent from her Ontario Works cheque. Chloe was in the process of applying to university programs and deciding about her future work and assistance plans. Since the time of the interview, Chloe has been accepted to a local university and is currently looking for new housing.

Barb is a 24-year-old white woman with a history of addiction issues. She came to the shelter because she decided to leave a long-term treatment program and believed she would be able to move in with her family in a nearby city. She found that her family was not supportive of her leaving the program and therefore would not allow her to remain in the family home. Barb relied on friends to help her find shelter and they brought her to the region and to the shelter. Barb had a number of problematic rooming houses that changed the way she viewed service providers and the legal system. She stated that she had always believed people wanted to help but after a case at tribunal to get her back rent failed she felt attacked by the service providers. Barb moved into assisted housing through the shelter. She has returned to the facility a number of times in order to leave unsafe living arrangements. Barb is currently receiving Ontario Works and has had periods where she was working full time since the time she lived in the shelter. Barb stated that she is motivated to go back to school and to find meaningful employment. She
is active in her church youth group and has made an effort to build strong social networks in the region but states that she is discouraged by the lack of progress she has made when trying to build them.

These women inform my analysis of the social networks of women in the Niagara region who have dealt with periods of homelessness and other crises.
CHAPTER THREE

If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin. – Charles Darwin

Theorizing Women’s Poverty and Homelessness

This thesis considers the resiliency of poor and homeless women’s social networks in times of crisis. The experiences related in the interviews must be contextualized in their broader social context. Canada’s political economy since at least the 1990s is characterized by income inequality and deep reductions in public supports for welfare, housing, mental health services and addiction services. Canada has long been characterized as a liberal welfare state that relies on needs and means testing to implement social benefits (Scott 1998). Increasingly, Canada’s welfare state has become neo-liberal, placing few restrictions on the market and failing to account for the social effect that market success may have on citizens.

In such a context, non-state supports (especially family and friends and not for profit agencies) must be drawn on more regularly and for more help. Reviewing the literature on support transactions for kin and friendship for support is apt. While families and friends are presented by politicians as the appropriate sources of support, neo-liberal policies also go hand in hand with a focus on individual responsibility. Successive federal and provincial governments have embraced neo-liberal logic and have, since at least the 1990s eroded the welfare state. Instead of focusing on collective answers to social problems, the focus has been on individual solutions, or the proverbial “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps”. People have become more individually responsible to negotiate support from their own networks. Thus, this chapter first briefly considers the rise of what can be termed a neo-liberal welfare state in Canada and reviews the host of cuts to public policy which served to decrease the supports available to women in housing crisis.
It then turns to family and friends to situate how sustainable reliance on these supports can be.\textsuperscript{16}

The neo-liberal project was also gender specific. Shifting care expectations to family members and friends means that women (more often than not) were called on to pick up that work (Bezanson 2006). At the same time, state supports for care giving were revoked which would intensify the workload for the women providing such aid. In addition to the added pressure of caregiving, women typically are in more precarious employment. There are a greater number of women in low wage positions such as cleaning, food service and temporary positions due to interrupted work histories and lack of training (Ehrenreich 2001). In short, neo-liberal policies are problematic for women.

**Social Assistance**

In Ontario, many changes have occurred in the last 15 years that were influenced by neo-liberalism. One of the biggest areas of reform was to the social assistance programs. I examine what has happened to the welfare state in Ontario because it is the primary source of income and services for many of the women interviewed. Many services were downloaded to the municipal level instead of the provincial level, which changed the consistency of services and made funding various programs more difficult.

There were massive changes to the Ontario welfare state in the 1990s. In 1995, Mike Harris’ Progressive Conservative government spearheaded a 22% cut to social assistance benefits (Bezanson 2006, Mitchell 1995). The party campaigned with promises of

\textsuperscript{16} Neo-liberal practices are particularly difficult and punitive for women, especially as women are the people who typically have to do the extra caring work that occurs when the state is less involved in social programs (Bezanson 2006).
welfare reform\textsuperscript{17}, yet the workfare program they were promoting cost more than other forms of assistance (Torjman 1996). The decision to execute a punitive program, which had been proven ineffective elsewhere, points to a culture that was anti-social assistance.

The changes to the social assistance programs in Ontario occurred simultaneously with a recession in the 1990s. The social assistance rates were cut and the eligibility rules were changed (Torjman 1996). “…Many Canadians remained suspicious of the poor, believing that poor men and women are the authors of their own misfortune, that a little effort and initiative stand between impoverished individuals and the economic mainstream” (Lochhead & Scott 2000 pg 1). The culture of suspicion for people receiving social assistance included:

- The reintroduction of the spouse in the house rule (which stipulated that if a woman was living with a man, she would be ineligible for assistance because he could provide for her),
- zero tolerance policies (meaning any type of welfare fraud would render a person ineligible for benefits for life),
- proposed drug tests and finger printing of welfare recipients (criminalizing people receiving benefits).
- snitch lines were opened for people to call and report suspected fraud (these lines cost a lot of money but resulted in few convictions),
- payment of the benefit to a third party (or trustee) if the recipient is deemed “irresponsible”, and
- changes to the appeal process (Torjman 1997).

\textsuperscript{17} This was called the ‘Common Sense Revolution’.
The income transfer benefits available as a last resort at present are called Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). OW is a program designed by the Ontario government with the goal of tiding people over when they are in financial need for a short period of time until employment is found. The Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services indicates that the criteria for receipt of assistance are: one must be an Ontario resident, be in immediate financial need and be willing to participate in employment programs (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services 2007). People applying for OW cannot have more than $536 available to them in cash or easily liquidated assets to be eligible for the benefit (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services 2007). The monthly allowances including the breakdown of basic needs and shelter portion are outlined below.

Table One
OW RATES
Basic Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of Dependents Other than a Spouse or Same-Sex Partner</th>
<th>Dependents 13 Years and Older</th>
<th>Dependents 0-12 Years</th>
<th>Recipient</th>
<th>Recipient and Spouse or Same-Sex Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>$195</td>
<td>$390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$446</td>
<td>$476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>$486</td>
<td>$512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$532</td>
<td>$576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$572</td>
<td>$612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>$608</td>
<td>$648</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each additional dependant, add $136 if the dependent is 13 years of age or over or $100 if the dependant is less than 13 years of age.
Shelter Allowance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit Unit Size</th>
<th>Maximum Monthly Shelter Allowance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>$649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 or more</td>
<td>$673</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is taken directly from the OW website calculating assistance portion of the DIR 29.0 document.

Table two is taken directly from the OW directive that shows the deficits that occur for many people receiving benefits. The shelter costs and other expenses often exceed the total benefit amount.

Chart Two

OW DEFICIT

Example 1: Two Person Family
Shelter $400
Heat $100
Shelter costs $500
The maximum shelter amount is $511. In this example, the couple would receive actual shelter costs of $500.

Example 2: Two Person Family
Shelter $500
Heat $160
Shelter costs $660
The maximum shelter amount is $511. In this example, the couple would receive $511.

Example 3: Two Person Family
Shelter $600
Heat $300
Shelter Costs $900
The maximum shelter amount is $511. In this example, the couple would receive $600, which is the amount issued to cover fuel costs for heat.
### Example 1: Sole Support Parent with Two Dependents

Sole support parent with two dependents under the age of 12 years, with shelter costs including:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortgage</td>
<td>$350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire Insurance: $120 yearly</td>
<td>$10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property Taxes: $1200 yearly</td>
<td>$120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuel Costs</td>
<td>$80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Shelter Costs:</strong></td>
<td><strong>$540</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Needs</td>
<td>$532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Assistance:</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1072</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These examples are taken right from the OW website DIR 29.0. It shows that in many cases, the OW amount is not equal to the amount a person must pay out.

For those who are precariously housed, a Hostel Agreement is included in Ontario Works. The Hostel Agreement is the policy that provides for people staying in shelters when they are homeless. The agreement pays local shelters an amount of approximately $50\(^{18}\) a day to house homeless people. The shelter is then responsible for giving the person his/her personal needs allowance which amounts to $1.90 a day. The Hostel Agreement allows for a person to spend up to 30 days in a 365-day period in a shelter.

Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) is a second form of social assistance for those with disabilities in financial need. The eligibility criteria are: a person must be an Ontario resident, they must qualify financially, and they must have had a disability that has been ongoing for at least one year and is likely to last at least one more year (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services 2007). The rates that a person is eligible for when receiving ODSP are higher than OW but it is very difficult for people to access the benefit and the amount falls below the low income cut off line.

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\(^{18}\) This amount is different depending on the shelter and the funding a shelter receives.
Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program are difficult to access and are contingent upon being involved with programs designed to help people transition back to work, to parent well or to battle addictions (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services 2007). Potential recipients of these benefits have long wait times to be seen by a worker in order to apply for assistance, they are deemed ineligible if they are unable to produce the appropriate documents and they are expected to prioritize their worker’s requests over all other responsibilities\(^9\). The benefit allotment to cover rent does not easily allow for a single person to rent alone, so usually recipients end up having to rent a room, often in student housing.

Table Three
AVERAGE RENTAL COSTS NIAGARA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Single Person</th>
<th>Rent</th>
<th>OW rate for all needs</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>ODSP rate</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Room</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Apartment</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One bedroom</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>-76</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Single with one dependent</th>
<th>Rent</th>
<th>OW rate for all needs</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>ODSP rate</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One bedroom</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>1223</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two bedroom</td>
<td>736</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>1223</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Single with two dependents</th>
<th>Rent</th>
<th>OW rate for all needs</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>ODSP rate</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One bedroom</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>1581</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>736</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>1581</td>
<td>845</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^9\) These comments are made from what I have observed when the women try to navigate the system to secure assistance.
These figures are compiled from the OW and ODSP websites and the Brock University off campus website and the St. Catharines standard website to determine rental costs in the Niagara region.

Managing with the meager benefits that social assistance affords translates into inadequate housing that often does not meet the needs of recipients. In addition, the remainder of the allowance (or the ‘basic needs’ portion) amounts to little more than one hundred dollars a month for a single person, which does not cover utilities, food, medication, and a phone where potential employers would be able to contact a person (the basic needs portion of ODSP is higher, but still very difficult for a person to live on).

Such a system produces homelessness and forces people to piece together an existence in any way possible. Often a small amount of prevention would help a person avoid the entire experience of being homeless but wait times and rigid rules about eligibility get in the way. One such example is the $1500 emergency fund available in the Niagara region where a person facing eviction for non-payment of rent can access this money if she/he provides evidence that she/he can usually pay rent. Most front line service providers are unaware of this service; it is not publicly advertised. Therefore, potential recipients do not hear about it until after they have been evicted. In addition, the stipulations about benefits such as the Community Start Up Benefit (CSUB)\(^{20}\) (through OW or ODSP) indicate that they cannot be accessed more than once every two calendar years. The truth is that often people living in inexpensive rental properties move frequently because the accommodations are not suitable, their roommates leave or the property is deemed not rentable.

\(^{20}\) CSUB is a set amount of money available for moving costs, last month’s rent and other necessities.
Poverty

The decreases in social assistance benefits and the shift to more precarious employment\textsuperscript{21} have resulted in more widespread poverty. In Canada, there is not an official poverty line; but rather, there are a number of different Low Income Cut Off lines (LICO). Statistics Canada states that these are not equivalent to determining poverty rates but they work to indicate the level of inequality (Statistics Canada 2005). Poverty is measured in Canada in two ways: absolute poverty and relative poverty. Absolute poverty is determined by taking the total household income and subtracting total household costs for specific goods and services, if there is a discrepancy, a household is considered low income or poor (Community Social Planning Council of Toronto 2007). Relative poverty is determined by comparing household costs to the general population’s spending for the same necessities. A household is considered low income or poor if they spend more on necessities than the general population does (Community Social Planning of Toronto 2007). Based on the 2001 Census data, over 16\% of Canadians were living in (absolute) poverty and many more people would be if it were not for income transfers. Many of those people are women because poverty is still overwhelmingly a problem that women face (Harman 2000, Townson 2005). Townson (2005) states that over half of adults living in poverty in Canada are women (approximately 1.5 million women). There are a whole host of reasons why women are more likely to be living in poverty including poor access to well paid employment, inadequate childcare, responsibility for caring work and lack of affordable housing (Neal 2004).

\textsuperscript{21} Non-standard jobs have increased, making it more difficult to secure full time, permanent work (Vosko 2000).
**Housing**

There is not enough affordable housing to meet the housing needs of Canadians. Many Canadians are not able to find housing that costs less than 50% of their income, which increases the risk of absolute homelessness (Canadian Council on Social Development 2007). In the middle of the last century, wealthy people moved into suburban areas leaving the central parts of cities vacant and available to make into rental properties. Wealthy people are again attracted to living in the downtown areas of cities, with the consequence that rental properties are converted into large homes for the rich. While rich people have started moving to the city centers, affordable housing has not become available elsewhere. If housing is available elsewhere, it rarely is connected (in the same way as downtown centers) to transportation, services or employment in the area.

In the 1950s and 60s, government funded slum clearance projects occurred in Canada, which destroyed affordable, yet unsightly, accommodations (Purdy & Kwak 2007). Eventually the federal government introduced co-op and low income housing funding, but the waiting lists were long because there were simply not enough spaces for everyone who needed them\(^{22}\). In the 1980s, Mulroney’s federal conservative government reduced the number of low-income housing units built each year (Colderley 1999) and cut nearly two billion dollars from the fund (National Housing and Homelessness Network 2003). In 1994, federal liberal Prime Minister Chrétien cut the public money almost completely from these projects, which basically stopped construction. In Ontario, conservative premier Harris halted construction completely in 1995. In addition to a decrease in affordable units being created, there were changes made to the taxes and

\(^{22}\) These wait times persist. In the Niagara region, there are 8000 families waiting for subsidized housing and the wait times are up to seven years (Houard 2005).
building codes that governed rental properties. Private (landlord) decisions to make their rental units affordable or classify them as low-income housing became less attractive²³.

**Mental Health**

In addition to a decrease in social assistance benefits and housing, homelessness has also increased with the deinstitutionalization of people with mental illnesses (Rice & Prince 2000). In the 1960s and 1970s, many mental hospitals were closed with the promise that services would be available to people with mental illness to help them live alone in their communities. The rationale for many of these closures was that with new drugs, many mental health problems could be treated (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care). In the Harris years, Ontario closed many hospitals, including psychiatric ones (Ontario Health Coalition). The disappearance of hospitals generally and mental health hospitals specifically meant that people needed to find other places and people to rely on for life skills and support. Contrary to the belief that people would be cured by medication, a ‘revolving door’ syndrome happened whereby people would come back to the few mental health services available (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care). Privatization became a cornerstone of the mental health services available in Ontario, which translated into fewer services available for people (especially those living in poverty). The lack of services has extended to the unavailability of facilities for people with addictions. The wait times for people to get into rehabilitation facilities is lengthy²⁴.

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²³ There has been a pendulum swing in the attitudes towards social housing with the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee declaring homelessness a national disaster. Although the policies have not been implemented, there is more discussion about the issue.
²⁴ The women indicated in the interviews that they waited for long periods of time when they tried to get treatment and as a shelter employee I observed the difficulties the women faced in getting into these programs.
In the window of time when a person is ready to try to stop using drugs or alcohol, there is often not a spot available for treatment (Cecckin 2007).

The absence of services, lack of affordable housing, and decline in social assistance rates culminate with higher rates of homelessness, as people are unable to cope with myriad hurdles. The increases the number of in shelter beds and the waiting lists at homeless shelters across the nation have risen yearly (Novac, Brown, & Gallant 1999). In addition to the increase of absolute homelessness, there has been an increase in the number of people on the cusp of homelessness. In response, many community churches and non-profit agencies developed food banks to feed people. People receiving assistance needed to rely on the charity of these services to patch together the resources to survive. The more formal institution of established food banks (rather than as a short term response) marks a shift to the state viewing public charity as a viable resource and as a given in policy. The changes to the public safety net have forced people to rely on their friends and family to provide help (see Bezanson 2006 for a good review).

**Social Capital**

As government services became more limited in scope and more restricted, people had to increase reliance on other supports. The social networks people rely on can be understood as a person’s social capital. Social capital is a concept that academics and politicians have found useful for understanding the role of networks in getting by and getting ahead. The former federal liberal government of Paul Martin (2003-2006) found social capital so useful that a new portfolio was created, which dealt almost exclusively with the social economy, social capital and its creation. Social capital is defined here as “norms, networks, and other forms of social connection” (Glaeser 2001). The concept, at
its most basic level, indicates that a person’s networks (co-workers, friends, service providers and family members) are integral to the quality of life that a person experiences. This understanding of the concept suggests that maintaining strong relationships with friends and family can act as a safety net for people in terms of finding employment, borrowing money and accessing social support.

Robert Putnam (2000) revitalized the concept of social capital with his study comparing Italy and the United States in terms of civic engagement, volunteering and participation in organizations. He postulated that decline in memberships of such activities as bowling leagues were linked to the decline in voting, volunteering and safe communities. In essence, Putnam made the argument that in order to have a well functioning society, people needed to be invested in other people’s well being. In other words, they needed to have a good stock of social capital. Putnam states that the reciprocal nature of social capital is beneficial because it means that every transaction, or helpful gesture, does not need to be bartered for an equally valuable service at that particular time, which means that help can happen more quickly (Putnam 2000). This appears to be particularly important for people who are in crisis. Women who are experiencing homelessness likely want to mobilize help quickly so that they can move through the crisis as easily as possible. If social capital can be called upon in a way that does not require an immediate exchange, it may be of particular use in avoiding homelessness. The personal nature of social relationships makes social capital attractive because unlike state provided social assistance (which is the same for each person and highly regulated), the immediate needs of an individual can be met head on through those relationships.
Bezanson and Carter (2006) point out that social capital must be understood from a critical sociological vantage point. Not all people are starting at equal points for social capital and therefore have different experiences of the concept. Women generally keep in touch more with family and friends than men (Bezanson & Carter 2006, van Vlooten 2005), which means that they tend to have a high level of a certain type of social capital. This type of social capital does not usually translate into getting high paying jobs or even into sustainable work placements or housing, because women tend to network in care related circles as opposed to the professional and political associations that men belong to (van Vlooten 2005). The tendency toward emotional ties for women could translate into security from absolute homelessness by cultivating relationships that allow one to stay with friends or family during times of crisis. There is a class component to social capital that tends to reinforce the social location that a person began with25. McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook (2001) indicate that people tend to associate with people who share many of the same characteristics and therefore social capital does not work to bridge difference. Instead, people are often drawn to each other because they feel a connection based on similarities.

A pitfall of social capital is that the people with the most capital are those who are least likely to need to call upon it; those who are wealthy, educated and employed have high stocks of social capital. There are possibilities tied up in that pitfall that government bodies could encourage social capital creation that bridges those with high levels of capital and those without. My concern is that because social relationships are reciprocal, the strains that are put on unidirectional helping relationships are too great to sustain the

initial relationship. I am using the social capital literature as a starting point for my analysis, but I am critical because I think there is an absence of gendered consideration present in the literature. In addition, the literature does not take up class, race, inequality or addictions, which leaves many people out of the scope of the social capital literature. Nonetheless, the exploration of social networks and their dynamics as experienced by the interviewees is bolstered by an understanding of social capital.

**Family/Friendship/Social Networks**

Conventional understandings of friends and social networks indicate that people should be able to rely on those people for support in times of need. Social capital theory also suggests that cultivating relationships can act as a safety net. This reliance on networks cannot be understood without also exploring the issue of reciprocity and the ways in which people can expect to be helped. Research about how people are able to rely on their own networks indicates that there are a variety of factors that influence that ability. Noce (2005) offers a good review of the variables, such as age, race, social-economic status, and the frequency with which people are in contact with each other.

Families are seen as a support network that can be called on to help people in times of trouble. Finch and Mason (1993) outline the historical trends that have made popular the understanding of the family as a site of support (1993, Finch 1989). They argue that contrary to popular opinion, family responsibilities are not static but they are negotiated and change over time (Finch & Mason 1993). In fact, their surveys show that there are few situations in which there are clear responsibilities to the family but that the ways in which family can be counted on change based on the individual circumstances and personality (Finch & Mason 1993 pg 14). While Finch and Mason state that the
family can be a safety net, they clarify that it should be used as a last resort, rather than a first defense (1993).

The notion that personal relationships act as a safety net (albeit a fragile one) is echoed by other scholars who emphasize that relationships are reciprocal. Stack (1974) outlines the ways that poor people in ‘the flats’ shared access to all resources, knowing that they would be taken care of when they were in need. In situations such as ‘the flats’ people reciprocate, but it is not necessarily directly to the person who offered help. Finch and Mason explore repayment of goods and services as “tit for tat”, showing that often people rely on others but pay the good deed forward instead of reciprocating directly to the person who offered help (1993). The notion of reciprocity as a necessary component of sustainable relationships becomes clear throughout the interviews, as many of the women feel guilt due to their inability to reciprocate.

One aspect of family responsibility is asking for and offering of support (Finch & Mason 1993). The research on family responsibility shows that if a person is deemed deserving, she/he should be offered help or be able to ask for assistance (Finch & Mason 1993). This is particularly important for the women interviewed for this study as they are often seen as undeserving because they are poor and dealing with addictions. Finch and Mason show that people do not think others should expect to be helped by their kin when they experience difficulty (1993). This is in relation to reciprocity – people should not help expecting to be helped in return. There is a fine line in terms of expectation as, “...the substantial body of theoretical scholarship... argues that reciprocity both initiates and sustains relationships...” (Nelson 2000 p 229). Nelson outlines different types of reciprocity based on the relative positions of the people involved in the exchange. People
in the same situations (for example other women at the shelter) can expect to have equal exchange of goods or services. Those in similar situations (precariously housed or living in poverty) are able to call on each other for more aid when it is available and will reciprocate when needed. When one person in an exchange is more fortunate than the other (for example well to do family members or friends) the receiver may expect that the giving of the help is enough reciprocation (Nelson 2000).

Reciprocity in friendship may take the form of being present in the day-to-day happenings of one’s life. There is a growing body of research about the importance of friendships for thriving and achieving success in life. The role that friends play in life appears to have changed in the recent past as young people are delaying marriage and leaving their family of origin prior to marriage (Watters 2003). Watters explores the emergence of the new “urban tribe” that is made up of clusters of young adults who are friends with each other to varying degrees and shows how these urban tribes become a moral compass and that they are relied on for help and support in the way that families have traditionally been depended on. Rubin (1985) also explores the way that friendships affect people throughout the life cycle. While both authors explain the importance of friendship and demonstrate how much people rely on their friends in order to survive, they do not address those who are persistently poor or those who have become homeless. It is also important to note that friendship has largely been ignored in scholarly research, especially in terms of how friendships are called upon for support. Aronson (1998 in Noce 2005) notes the fact that friendships are positioned in unclear social space, not in the public realm of policy and not in the private sphere of family.
**Community**

The community is a site of social capital and support for many people. The respondents in this study indicated that they did not have the same supports from the community, but felt judged and isolated. One major source of isolation is that of judgment from service providers. In many cases, social service providers are a site of oppression and this cannot go unmentioned. Young suggests that oppression includes the inability to vocalize one’s needs, thoughts and feelings and that it is also powerlessness to take action on these things (1990). All of the participants will have experienced a service provider at some time and there is a body of literature that shows the training and day-to-day execution of service provider’s employment fosters an atmosphere that can be oppressive for those that require services (Mullaly 2002). The economic policies and procedures that penalize people for being poor\(^{26}\) increase the probability that service providers will mistreat clients due to their responsibility to adhere to strict policies. There are frequent examples of this practice. Often service providers are forced to choose who would be the most likely person to ‘rehabilitate’ rather than the people who need services most in order to show that their programs are successful in order to continue receiving government funding.

It is clear that the lives of the interviewees are affected by many factors. Of significant importance are the social policies available as a safety net and the political economy in which those policies occur. In addition to those factors, the process of relying

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\(^{26}\)By penalizing the poor, I mean that people who are receiving benefits based on their low income are often required to explain where their money goes and have less autonomy about their spending choices.
on family and friends for support during times of crisis makes resolving the plight of these women more delicate.
CHAPTER FOUR

An ounce of blood is worth more than a pound of friendship. Spanish Proverb

Social networks and family support

Since the 1990s in Canada, there has been a shift in public policy towards a model that would have people, in times of crisis, rely heavily on their personal networks. Popular public opinion appears to be that people in trouble should rely on their families first, then their friends and as a last resort, the government (Neysmith, Bezanson & O’Connell 2005). Often women in the shelter express frustration that while they are stigmatized for accepting government aid, they are also seen as ungrateful and lazy because the support is not sufficient to stop the cycle of needing social assistance. The perception that people should rely on kin is clear from the words of service providers, staff, and the shelter guests. There was a common refrain of family as a place of refuge. Even though the majority of the women were unable to rely on their own families for support, they still identified caring work as a family obligation and relied on the traditional notions of nuclear family kinship terms to label people that they did rely on.

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27 This shift was especially clear during the conservative government of Harris and Eves (1995-2003) in Ontario that boasted tax cuts, greater emphasis on individual responsibility and less reliance on government aid.
28 Porter (2003) states that even when public policy is extensive, it is written with the assumption that family can be relied on for support or to bolster the aid given by the government.
29 This is a common problem for people who are trying to change their life course but are not able to make all the programs work together. Often people are unable to pay for their transportation to job skills programs or are not able to spend eight hours a day job searching while they are at a drug and alcohol day treatment program. As a result, they feel forced to quit the program that will help them the most. It is a common explanation that people are ‘lazy’ and reliant on the system because they choose not to take advantage of these programs without acknowledging that there are still barriers to them.
The women often identified people close to them as their families, which perpetuated the notion that families are meant to have unconditional love for each other and that love should be shown through unwavering support. This idealized vision of family life is detrimental to the point of being a cruel set up for people, because these relationships cannot be called on to remedy the shortcomings of casual employment, patchwork social policies and the problems associated with addictions. Despite the easily rhymed off phrases about the solidarity and strength of family ties, the lived experience of family life shows that people are not reliable for long term support. Luxton (2006) found that people were willing to help sick acquaintances for specific (and short) periods of time, but that willingness faded when the expiry date on aid was unclear. The same can be said about women turning to their families due to poverty and homelessness. Women appeared to internalize the lack of support from their kin in times of crisis and believed the lack of help was because they were somehow unworthy of aid.

This chapter will explore the experience of family support (or lack thereof) in terms of the discourse of family, the problem of charity versus right, the issues of addictions and the reality of familial abuse. I will explore the disappointment the respondents expressed about their kin’s indifference to their suffering and the obligation they felt to their families. These stories show that despite romanticized and nostalgic notions of family, many marginalized people are not able to depend on their kin in times of trouble. In fact, these stories demonstrate that family is sometimes a site of abuse that renders women helpless and dependent. This indicates that public policy must move toward inclusive and universal aid in order to truly be of service to those in need. The
stories these women share demonstrate that reliance on family is not an appropriate first line of defense against poverty and homelessness.

The women spoke of the need to have support in many areas of their lives. They indicated that they would have liked to be able to rely on their parents to ‘fix it’ for them. This meant that they would have liked to move in with their families, that they would have liked to borrow money, or that they wanted to be able to self disclose about their experiences to their kin and be truly understood. There were times that the respondents talked about wanting to be forgiven, wanting to be believed and wanting their families to stick up for them when they felt attacked. Overwhelmingly, the women were not able to do these things and did not find help doing them with their families.

**Pride / Charity versus Right**

The women indicated that, at times, pride interfered with asking for help. It appears that they were referring to the issue of charity versus dessert. When a person accepts assistance from a family member, they may feel that, and be perceived as taking charity. On the other hand, if that person has social service programs available to access, they may feel that, and be perceived as using services that they have a right to access. The shift from dessert to charity indicates a shift in the way social safety nets are understood as rights available to all citizens. In a rights based model, those accessing public services are not categorized as needy or dependent.

I anticipated that many of the women would be coming from family situations that mirrored their present situations, and that their extended families would not be in a financial position to offer monetary help. This was not always the case. Over half of the
women came from families that were financially well off\(^{30}\) and they still stated that they could not ask for help. Some of the women did come from families who were also struggling, indicating the class realities of family dependence as a policy initiative. It is not possible for those people in the lowest income brackets to add more dependents to their lives without an increase in income.

The issue of pride in accessing or asking for help was a common theme in the interviews. Stephanie spoke about her problems reciprocating and about how that impacts her in terms of her pride. Stephanie came to the shelter upon recommendation by hospital staff (she had been put in the hospital because of her self-destructive behavior). She had been living with an aunt who, at that time, was firmly planted in the middle class. Stephanie spoke about her other family members (her father and her grandmother) and I concluded that they were occupying similar socio-economic spaces whereby they were in a position to offer financial help but were not wealthy. Stephanie is a young single mother living in co-op housing with her infant son. She came to the shelter as a young teen and was in and out of the shelter, couch surfing, living with extended family and in transitional housing for close to three years before she gave birth. She wanted to be able to rely on her family for housing and emotional support, but when they extended that help she found it difficult to abide by the rules and what she perceived to be judgment that accompanied their help and would be asked to leave or would chose to leave their homes. Stephanie now relies on her extended family to help her with childcare and to answer her questions about raising her infant. Stephanie expressed disappointment that she was not able to reciprocate and acknowledged that the support was extended in order to benefit

\(^{30}\) This was either explicitly stated or I surmised it from their statements.
Text content
her child. She stated that no one in her family needed her help and that she was unable to give anything back despite the fact that she needed to ask them questions. Stephanie indicated that she had been in and out of the shelter system throughout her teenage years and that she had often rejected help from her family based on her pride and family disapproval of her boyfriend, which may have led to them offering aid less frequently. This discussion shows that while Stephanie may have been able to rely on her family, it came at a price to her. She would have to make difficult choices about the person she loved (as her family disapproved of her child’s father) and she would have to be prepared to follow rules for her behavior that did not fit the way she wanted to live. The decision then became less about finding a family member to rely on versus reliance on the public purse, but about being autonomous and free to make her own life choices

Sara experienced some of the same problems that Stephanie did asking for help due to her pride. Sara is a young high school drop out who came to the shelter after breaking up with her long-term girlfriend whom she lived with. Initially, Sara had not asked her family to support her because she thought she should be able to provide for herself. It became clear in her interview that part of the reason that she felt unable to turn to family for support was her fractured relationship with her parents. Sara had spoken to her father only once in eighteen years and she was unwilling to speak to me about her mother at length. She indicated that living with her grandparents was far from ideal but

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31 Stephanie was regulated by public policy (Ontario Works) initially upon leaving the shelter in terms of where she could rent and what she was meant to do daily, but that regulation appeared to be less strict than her family regulation. Stephanie, at the time of the interview, was no longer receiving Ontario Works but was on Employment Insurance for maternity leave from her employer.

32 Likely because her mother was dealing with her own housing crises and addiction issues.
that she had no other options because of her difficulties finding housing. Sara’s grandparents lived in a nice neighborhood and worked hard for their money at a local senior’s residence and as a cook. Her grandparents were financially capable of allowing her to live with them without paying for many household bills, so they were able to absorb some of the costs associated with Sara living with them which in turn made it easier for her to manage on $536 a month. Sara was clear that issues of self-worth had made it difficult for her to ask to stay at their home,

Me and my girlfriend broke up and I didn’t want to ask my grandparents. After being on your own for two years, three years, living with somebody, you don’t want to ask for their support because you want to be on your own...I had to ask my grandparents. I had to ask them if I could stay with them. I felt kinda embarrassed too.

Embarrassment was the reason that Michelle gave for not going to her family when she frequently lost her housing and became a regular guest at the shelter. She stated that she had often pushed her family away hoping that they would not realize that she was using drugs and alcohol. Michelle said that she did not want her parents to see her when she was ‘a mess’. Michelle indicated that she relied on her family (especially her parents) on a day-to-day basis for support and as a sounding board. However, her own feelings about her drug and alcohol use and related behaviors made her ashamed and she did not want to expose her parents to that side of herself more than she had to. Michelle’s family members were in a good position financially as her father had worked at a local factory since the time he left high school. Her mother went between periods of working to periods when she received a disability allowance due to a health condition. The level of financial comfort made it easier for Michelle’s family to offer support than it was for some other families to do the same. Michelle’s aunts and uncles did not appear to be as
comfortable financially as her parents, but she did rely on them at times for emotional support.

Donaghy told me about the ways that she had tried to rely on her family in the past and indicated that her addiction issues had made her extended family less likely to believe her and more likely to listen to her estranged husband’s viewpoint. It is important to contextualize the way that Donaghy’s family life has been ordered. Her estranged husband has an addiction to sex (having frequent physical and internet affairs) and to pornography. Donaghy believes that the low self-worth she experienced through his sexual infidelity contributed to her drinking. She indicated that when she was drinking, she had been arrested for stealing her children’s allowances and for driving drunk (her husband had called the police about these incidences). She stated that she has been quite disruptive to her family when she was an active alcoholic and that when she was drunk, the rage she always felt was sometimes unleashed. Because her estranged husband’s addiction to sex and pornography were less disruptive to her extended family, it became possible for his addictions to be understood as less severe and for her to be positioned as the ‘problem’ in the relationship. Donaghy believed that her estranged husband had been successful in convincing her extended family that she was imagining the extent of his sexual appetite and the effect it had had on her and their relationship. The perception that they had chosen him over her left her feeling like she was unable to rely on them.

Donaghy discussed her immediate family’s financial situation and made it clear that she was used to living a life of luxury with her estranged husband. She cataloged a long list of ‘guilt gifts’ (as she named them), including a boat, a summer home, special

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33 In the past, Donaghy had tried to talk to her family about the effect of her husband’s affairs on her. She felt financially able to leave him, but not emotionally prepared.
gadgets and trips. She also indicated that she received a monthly allowance from her husband that supplemented her Ontario Works cheque at the time of the interview. Her family is financially able to offer her any assistance (she has a brother who is a doctor, another sibling is a physiotherapist, and her parents are in a position to pay for daily housecleaners) but they may not be able to extend aid in the ways that she needs it.

Donaghy also talked about saving face but couched it in terms of being a burden to loved ones. When she was asked about talking to family about things that are bothering her she said, “I am careful. When there are professionals out there that can deal with my burden I don’t need to burden them [my parents]”. Donaghy indicated that she did not want to be seen as demanding her family’s charity, or be a drain on her family’s emotional resources. Therefore she decided to not talk about daily problems with family when she had access to professional help. The issue of pride came up when she talked about her estranged husband’s sex addiction because she felt that people looked at her in another light when they learned about his behavior. She hinted about feeling as if she was not a good wife and mother if he was interested in having sex with other people. Some of the problems of self-worth and the pressures of living up to gendered expectations are illuminated through Donaghy exploring her issues with a sex addicted partner. The issue of pride was frequent in the interviews about many different situations, but in terms of family, the women appeared to internalize their struggles and believed that their hardships were personal problems that they should not approach their family about unless aid was offered first.
Family as Refuge

The family is defined in sociological terms as a social group, an intersection where people interact and where the goals of reproduction and socialization occur (Eshleman & Wilson 2001 pg. 2). There is a “conservative bias” involved in much of what is written about families and how policies are developed. Many people have bought into the stereotypes that frequently play out in the media, including rigid gender roles and caring expectations for families. The concept of family is complex, but is often understood that one of the most basic roles of family is to care for each other. Hayford argues:

Families play a central role in our social existence. We rely on family to take care of almost all children and a great many old people. We rely on families to provide housing for their members, as well as food and general care (Hayford 1987).

The message here is that people should be able to rely on family, but the intent of this passage may have focused more on children rather than grown people, especially those with issues of addiction. In terms of policymaking, there are clear expectations that families are socially responsible and have each other’s best interest at heart. Many social policy programs (for example Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, Child Tax Credit) understand the family not as a group of individuals, but as a whole unit, and therefore make monies available to one person for the entire unit (Eichler 1987). This practice extends to situations whereby people in a romantic relationship who are living together must get their benefits together, which significantly reduces the money available to them (Cecckin 2007). It is the burden of people sharing space to prove that they are not

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34 “A romantic view of the nuclear family in the past which overlooks problematic aspects of family life throughout history” (Selman & Wilson 2001 pg. 23).
in a romantic relationship. This becomes problematic when there are issues of abuse, addiction or absent family members. For instance, a person who does not have benefits coming to her in her own name may find it more difficult to leave an abusive partner. An entire family that has one person with an addiction pays the price of spending the month’s income in a binge. Sometimes the family member who has benefits coming in his or her name becomes absent but the burden of proving that falls to the people left behind.

Many respondents wanted their family to offer support before it was asked for, and also to be able to ask for help more easily. Many of the women who come to the shelter discuss the pain they feel about not being able to turn to their families for support. Many times, when a woman asked to move in to her family’s home or asked to borrow money, she was flat out refused. Some of the women who asked for support were asking people in very similar economic and emotional situations and understood that there was no aid to offer. Some women had family members in subsidized housing and therefore would have put their housing at risk if they had allowed someone to stay over for any length of time. Other people were renting rooms themselves and had no space.

The women who were asking for help from family members who were financially capable of helping but who had chosen not to do so, were in a more difficult situation for them to understand. They were not denied help because their kin were unable to do so financially, but rather a choice was made not to help. This rejection was hurtful to the

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35 For example, see the Spouse in the House rule outlined in chapter three.
36 As an interviewer, it seemed that these families were particularly unhelpful and harsh, but as a shelter employee, I have spoken to a number of family members who outlined the many times that they had been available to support their family member before the time that they refused and the woman arrived at the shelter. This speaks to the fact that these are not networks that can be relied on all the time.
J'y
women. In the interviews, the respondents were hesitant to disclose the extent to which their family being distant hurt them but hinted around the feelings through their responses or once the tape recorder was turned off. The women echoed the sentimental view of the family often seen in mainstream culture by speaking of family as if the existence of biological bonds should automatically equal caring relationships and help during times of crisis. Even when their own realities did not reflect this experience of support, they relied on the discourse of family as a safety net to express the closeness with or reliance on other people. When the women discussed family relationships as ‘givens’ that should exist regardless of personal circumstance, they took a lot of blame for the dissolved bonds. This internalized blame showed the ways that the women saw their fractured family relationships as individual problems and still maintained the notion that everyone else was able to rely on their kin in any circumstance. Chloe\textsuperscript{37} spoke at length and in many different places during her interview about her support group in kinship terms.

I look at the shelter as my other family, like you were my mother figure and Melinda was the big sister type and everybody had their own little role for me...I lived at the shelter for three months. The first month was a wreck and by the third month I didn’t want to leave because I had made relationships with most of the advocates. It was like I was leaving my family all over again and it was really hard. It was even worse than when I was at home.

She went on to describe the feelings she had about her high school teachers who also supported her. “I rely on my teachers a lot, I think that, like they’re my family you know what I mean?...Pretty much all my teachers are my parents.” She continues to make

\textsuperscript{37} Chloe was the nineteen year old woman who came to the shelter after her mother moved back to a Western province, leaving her with her grandparents. She was unable to stay with them but was urged to stay in Ontario in order to finish her schooling. Chloe stayed at the shelter for three months. Chloe’s family was not in a financial position to help her – her mother worked at a number of jobs and her father had been in and out of jail with a spotty employment record.
the connection of help and support to family ties even though the way that she describes her biological family is dismissive and that she feels she is a burden to them. Chloe is able to talk about how her family has not been supportive and about how she feels she is disconnected from them due to distance. Paradoxically, Chloe chooses those terms to define people that are close to her. Her way of understanding close bonds and which people she can rely on point to her individualizing her experience of isolation from family as well. It appears that Chloe still believes that families are meant to be caretakers and that everyone else is able to call on them for support. Chloe was not the only participant who relied on this discourse about family when talking about her networks. Heather also used family terms about staff at the shelter and women’s detoxification center. Donaghy also fell back on discourse about family and home when she outlined her experience at the shelter. She used the term home as synonymous with safety and acceptance and indicated that she had that feeling at the shelter but not at her residence with her family:

I was really in a bad place and I was in a good place when I got to the shelter. It’s weird to say, but I felt like I was home. It’s the one place I think in the last five years where I felt comfortable being myself and they respected me for being me and they didn’t expect anything from me and (crying pause) … I feel like I am complete there... know that no matter how bad things are, you’ll be ok there.

Many of the women talked about their home group\textsuperscript{38} for Alcoholics Anonymous as a second family and spoke of their close friends as sisters. The ways that the women spoke of other people as family showed the ways that they wished they were able to rely

\textsuperscript{38} “This is the group where they accept service responsibilities and try to sustain friendships... with membership comes the right to vote upon issues that might affect the group and A.A. as a whole...this, ideally, is voiced through the home group...home group becomes our extended family. Once isolated by our drinking, we find in the home group a solid, continuing support system” (Alcoholics Anonymous).
on their own families. The interviewees discussed wanting to be able to confide in family members, to be able to turn to them when they were in need and their desire to be free from family judgment.

**Lack of Support**

The women show that they are simultaneously disappointed by family and hopeful about family in the ways that they discuss the relationships and continue to use the terms of endearment to indicate the strength of the emotional connection that they have for people. The women talked about family pressures and expectations and indicate that there is a belief that family will be there for them no matter the cost. The reality that they are not always there during frequent hard times translates into severe disappointment. As an outsider it is possible to see the strain that recurrent demands for help causes for family members, especially because those women who are battling addictions have repeated crises. However, the interviews indicate that the women asking for support do not necessarily see the situation in the same way. The dissatisfaction was increased if support appeared to be extended to other family members in similar situations as Barb discussed in her interview,

> I don’t want to compare, but when my sister was working ... my dad, my step-dad, he drove her all around to the different places, to the counselors, but for me, I have no help so I have to do it alone.

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39 For example, Chloe indicates the different varieties of closeness and disclosure she has with different staff members by naming one a mother and another a big sister. Donaghy and Mickey both call their close girlfriends that they met at the shelter their sisters. Almost all of the women name someone family when they are trying to indicate how close they are.

40 Barb had been living with her addictions for years and then went to a treatment center in an Eastern province. She left the center with a few months left in her year because she felt she had learned all she would be able to learn. She believes that her decision to leave early was part of the reason that her parents were unwilling to have her stay in their home.
This double standard in Barb’s family is likely due to her addictions and her siblings’ lack of addictions. The effect that addictions have on support networks is serious. While some family members may have been willing to offer help if drugs and alcohol were not factors, often family members are hesitant to give money or shelter to people battling addictions for fear that they are enabling that person. Addictions are understood as personal problems and often people attached to an active addict do not realize the effect the addiction has on them personally. This goes both ways, and the person being counseled for addiction issues is meant to be isolated from their family and to rely on them as a secondary resource (Csiernik & Alaggia 2003). The impact that a person’s addiction has on an entire family should not be underestimated. Often the time before a person recognizes that they have a problem is filled with lies, breaking trust, family stress and upset (Csiernik & Alaggia 2003, Campbell, Masters & Johnson 1998, Cowley & Gordon 1995). Even when a person confronts the issue of addiction, there are tensions that a family must navigate. The ways that individuals interact and deal with conflict change when someone becomes sober and that can be problematic (Csiernik & Alaggia 2003).

Barb understood the lack of help as her family feeling more strongly about her sister, not as a result of past experiences. Other women also talked about the disappointment they felt in the lack of help from their kin. Tracy said that she had lived the charmed life until she was divorced from her husband. After the divorce, Tracy fell on hard times and eventually became homeless. She left a comfortable life when she divorced and fell in love with another man who developed an addiction to crack cocaine. At the same time that his addiction reached a level that they could not afford to maintain,
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Tracy had to stop working because of her frequent and debilitating pain from a major car accident and her mental health issues that left her anxious and anti-social. She was unable to call on her parents who were on a fixed income (Ontario Disability Support Program) and had been shut out by her siblings (likely because of the divorce and her partnership with an active addict) who were in a financial position to help. During her interview, she talked about nights she had slept on porches and the deplorable conditions of some of her rental rooms while juxtaposing her experience with her wealthy family member’s experiences. She talked about the surprise she felt at being shut out of members of her family’s lives,

My one brother would have helped me out except for the fact that for two years he hasn’t been able to walk very well so he’s not working because of the truck accident and they are putting two kids through university, so like (pause) I asked my one sister (pause) I mean at one time we were really close, I was the maid of honour in her wedding, and everything I asked her she said no. They’ve got no kids or anything, I asked her, ‘you got ten bucks?’ and she said, ‘no’.

The quote indicates that Tracy is trying to justify why her brother is not able to help her because of his other responsibilities and she expressed her disgust (through the tone of her voice) with her sister, who was financially able to help, turning her away. This touches on the gendered expectations of care giving and support. Tracy went on to talk about how painful it was for her own son to refuse to help her or to speak to her and about her hopes for their future relationship,

I have two sons, my one son won’t speak to me because he’s got the snob syndrome, you have to have to have, and well, mom doesn’t have…Once they see that I’m on my feet, they’ll be fine…there’s gotta be a point where my son is going to need me around. I don’t think I’ll ever be close to him again.
Tracy talked about the future; she believed that her son who was not speaking to her would decide that they could rekindle a relationship once she became more financially secure. This speaks to the way that she viewed her own self-worth and the way that her family viewed her worth if she would accept them speaking to her only when she was financially secure.

Often when the respondents talked about times they were not able to turn to their family, they talked about feeling betrayed and about not being provided for in the way that they had expected. Chloe talked about her resentment,

>If I needed like $10 she gives me this guilt trip and says, 'I don’t have the money' and it’s hard ‘cause she has all these luxuries that I don’t have and I end up feeling kinda like she should be there for me and she’s not.

All of the respondents talked about different ways that they had asked for assistance in the past. Some women indicated that they had been able to rely on family for some things (such as Stephanie who felt lodging with her family came at too great a cost). They also explained that there were expiry dates and other costs involved in taking the help. Heather tried to stay with her father when she was first evicted from her home but he was unwilling to take her (he did house her children for a short period). Donaghy stated that she would have been able to stay with her parents for a short period of time after the treatment center but that would come at a cost because they were always present and they were not as supportive about her recovery journey as she needed them to be.

**Reciprocal Responsibilities**

The respondent’s belief that family should have obligations to each other went both ways. Despite the few resources that the women had for themselves, the majority of them were willing to give everything to their children and other family members if any of
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them needed something. Heather recognized that her teenaged children called her without fail when her payday rolled around, “my two teenage children … like to call just when they know I get paid but besides that not really.” Heather stated that she would transfer money into their accounts and send them bus tickets or phone cards when they needed them, which would put her behind financially. Since the time of the interview, Heather has continued to support her older children financially and has even found ways to pay for their housing so that they would not go without. She would also buy her younger children gifts whenever she had money as a way to ease her pain at not being with them and not being there to parent them day-to-day. June, like Heather, dealt with being separated from her son due to Family and Children Services intervention. She spent her days going to a college preparation course and lived in a room in a house. June talked about seeing her family and relying on them for some sporadic support but stated that her bi-polar disorder and recent divorce weighed heavily on her when thinking about her son’s absence. June indicated that she would make sacrifices for gifts that she wanted to give to make up for not being her son’s daily caregiver. She decided to go without groceries in the month of December in order to buy her son Christmas presents so that he would have gifts during her holiday visit which was a way that she saw herself reciprocating to the people caring for her child.

The women who were not able to help their family members financially still believed that they had obligations of care work. Mickey\(^{41}\) indicated that she often tried to

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\(^{41}\) Mickey is a woman who moved to the province when she was trying to commit suicide as the culmination of her years of drug and alcohol addictions. She has become sober, finished her high school equivalence and was working for many years. Recently she has gone off on sick leave and is hoping to get Ontario Disability Support Program in the future. Mickey has had a checkered past with her family including sexual abuse.
call her biological daughter and granddaughter despite being repeatedly turned away, “I’m her blood...biologically I am her grandmother and you can’t keep me away from her”. Mickey suggested that by continuing to call and offer support, her biological daughter and granddaughter would know that they could turn to her if they needed anything and that she would be aware of their emotional well being. Mickey is falling back on the belief that “blood is thicker than water” and that based on biological ties she should have a relationship with her daughter and granddaughter.

Tabitha relied heavily on the discourse of family and her responsibilities as a mother. At the time of the interview, she was facing serious health problems and was emotionally responsible for her three daughters and her grandson. Tabitha spoke at length about family obligations and the role she played as a mother. Tabitha had to leave school at an early age in order to care for her ill father and she stated that she understood that to be her role, but that his refusal to return the help years later stung all the more because of her sacrifices for him. Tabitha talked about the gendered ways that care happened in her family of origin and her understanding of her importance in her family. She was adopted and had a brother that was a biological child to her parents. Tabitha remembered acting as a servant to her family and catering to her brother. She was expected to care for her sick father but her brother was not asked to make sacrifices at that time.

She put value in her immediate family and stated that her priority was to keep her daughters and grandchild safe at all costs. This translated into moving across the

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42 One of Tabitha’s daughters was an important witness in a criminal case that compromised the safety of the entire family. Tabitha stated that she was unwilling to let one of her daughters go into a witness protection program without the whole family and therefore decided she would be responsible for keeping her entire family safe from potentially harmful situations.
province from shelter to shelter for close to a year in order to keep one of her children protected. Despite her own health concerns and financial burdens, Tabitha worked two jobs and gave her children who did not live with her care packages and had them over for meals nightly so that they did not have to pay for groceries.

As long as I’ve got enough food to feed, I’d say just me and Penny but that’s just not my reality. Kendra and Jenny and Tony…and I will help them out again…because that’s what a mother does.

Tabitha asserted that she loved her children and would go without so that they could have what they wanted. She often followed up those comments by saying it was a mother’s job to do that or that she was fulfilling her role. Tabitha babysat often and planned to eventually take care of her grandchild fulltime so that her eldest daughter could experience her youth without having to be a mother at the same time. Tabitha also indicated that she was the one who went with her daughters to doctor’s appointments, for legal appointments, and took care of the day-to-day details of their lives like shopping for toiletries and necessities. Tabitha said that she believed these things to be her obligation to her children and grandchildren because they are her family and that family needs to stick together to take care of one another.

Many of the women identified their family responsibilities as caregivers and emotional supports. Three women talked about times when they had attempted suicide and about how they had tremendous guilt about how easily they were willing to let their families (especially their children) down. One of those women, Donaghy, talked about a time in her life when it felt like it would be easier to end her life rather than go on living

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43 In the time since the interviews, at least one woman has attempted suicide and expressed her remorse afterwards about the experience for her children.
what she felt was a lie. The pressures of hiding her (now estranged) husband’s sex
addiction and her own alcoholism was too great and she tried to take her life:

That night I flat-lined at the hospital. So I spent the night at the hospital, I
remember looking up at these faces (pause) and I was kinda sad that I was
here to remember it at that point in time and then I thought about it and
thought about how selfish that really is and it’s selfish, how could my kids
go through life and have to tell their kids, ‘oh you know your grandmother
is a drunk who committed suicide because she was a coward’.

In contrast, there were some women who were able to rely on family members for
aid that did not always feel the same responsibility to their kin. For example, Sara lived
with her grandparents because she was unable to find suitable housing while at the shelter
and subsequently moved in with them. She indicated that she was reliant on them and
was unable to reciprocate, “I can’t pay no bills or anything ‘cause I have no job. But if I
did, if I had a really, really good job, I’d give them money.” Sara also talked about the
emotional support she gets from her family by asking them for advice and talking them
about her day-to-day issues and that those were the actions that were expected of family.
When asked about who she helped to get by she stated that, “I baby-sit for my uncle if I
just don’t want to go out ‘cause sometimes he wants to go out with his girlfriend.
Sometimes I won’t even ask for money…it’s about being close to your family”.

Sara feels there are different obligations in family situations based on one’s
position in the family. In particular, she was disappointed about her lack of relationship
with her parents,

My dad lives in the States, I don’t really associate with him. He’s a pain in
my ass. If he’s not going to find a reason to talk to me then I don’t want to
talk to him, you know? I haven’t seen him in eighteen years; I’ve talked to
him twice on the phone.
Many of the women were dealing with breaks not only from their parents and siblings, but also from their children that increased the trauma they felt during their periods of homelessness. This relates again to their understanding of gender roles and the importance of being a mother for a woman. Many of the respondents spoke of being proud of their ability as mothers and their accomplishment of having good children. When they were separated from their children due to Family and Children’s Services’ intervention or by personal choice to not expose their children to life in a shelter, they felt their absence acutely. The presence of Family and Children’s Services in the lives of many of these women point to an issue of surveillance of the poor, especially mothers. Many of the women who walked through the doors of the shelter after losing their children were not guilty of abuse or neglect, but of being poor. Some women lose custody of their children for inadequate housing or inadequate supplies. In light of low support payments, low wages and poor housing choices, those are not issues that are addressed by apprehending the children, but end up being further punishment for being poor. Granted, many of the women that were not living with their children at the time of the interview were separated from them because of the issues related to addictions. The women (for the most part) understood the reasons that they needed to be apart, but found the separation to change the way their understood themselves as women, and of their role in the world. The fact that many of these women could not rely on their extended family members to take custody of their children during the periods that they could not was

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44 Let me assert here that I am by no means finding problems with FACS apprehending children that are in abusive or neglectful environments. I am simply saying that in the case where a woman lives in a run down apartment or doesn’t have a crib it is logical (and more cost effective) to help the woman secure those items rather than take her kids.
devastating to them. The women who had family members taking care of their children were both grateful and resentful at the same time.

Heather spoke at length about how difficult it is for her to be without her children as they are in temporary care while she battles her addictions. Heather believed that the absence of her children made it easier for her kin networks to choose not to extend their support to her. During some periods of housing transition before she came to the city, her extended family was willing to take her children into their care but would not allow her to stay in their homes. She mentioned some of the ways that she attempted to deal with the pain of separation, including working a lot, “working is about the only positive aspect that I try to accept about not having my kids with me right now is that I am able to work pretty much a crazy hectic schedule.” She worries about “my work, I work an awful lot and just my pressures of trying to fix everything that has gone wrong in my life in such a short period of time to please people that have control of my children, my family.”

Addiction
The majority of the women interviewed for this project had some connection to addictions. All of the respondents had a family member battling addictions or were struggling with drug and alcohol problems themselves. Of the eleven interviews, six of the women indicated that addiction was one of the main reasons that they had initially become homeless. One strategy that the women used during active addiction periods was to block out their families so that they did not get caught abusing drugs or alcohol. Heather is one of the many women who discussed putting distance between herself and her family due to her addictions during times when the family was willing to help. It seems that family members of women battling addictions are unable to maintain their
support for long periods of time when they are not reciprocated or when they are acting in unpredictable ways due to their altered state of mind.

My father, I have never lived with him, ever in my life. In fact when I first lost my townhouse in the Spring of 2005 I asked my dad for some help and he took my kids in for a couple weeks but he told me basically where I could go. Yep. He didn’t have time for me because I was a mess and it’s ok that he is, but no. He was not there for me; so no my family is not an option when I run into a big crisis because he doesn’t give two shits.

Heather talked about having the freedom to focus on her sobriety because her children were in care and the way that affected her feeling of belonging, “in a sense [I feel isolated] only because I’m here without my family”. Although she states she is able to accept that at this point, she contradicts herself later on, stating,

Some of the girls from the shelter make me feel better about being here without my family. But some days, you know, nothing helps…I have no family that I could call. My dad is still an actively using alcoholic and like I can call him and talk to him and just shoot the breeze about the day but basically he’s, I’ve never lived with my father, so he’s just, my life is mine and he’ll listen and that but really I got to get my stuff out of my own situations and my step-mom she’s ok sometimes but she’s got a Jekyll and Hyde personality towards me…I see the children once in a blue moon and my father pretty much the same about once, a couple times a year… I have a brother I haven’t seen in four years, I have a sister in (Western province) that I haven’t seen in many years, at least about eight, I have another sister I choose not to see, and I have another sister that I don’t have a clue where she is. And my mom I haven’t spoken to my mom in eleven years, so no family is pretty much not there…when I go through messed up periods in my life I tend to just block them all out.

Donaghy blamed the troubles in her familial relationships on herself (and her addiction) as well,

If I’m not close to them it’s because I have alienated myself through my addictions usually…there have been times when it hasn’t been good but that’s me making problems and issues so I didn’t have to go around and see them and stuff like that. Then they couldn’t see me screwing up.
Michelle spoke about the tensions that exist around drug and alcohol use in her family. “I’ve had to put some family members out of my life because they drink a lot and do drugs so I just stay away from them.” She also talked about the period of time when she came to the shelter. Michelle was clear that her addictions made it impossible for her to ask her family to support her, not that her family was unwilling. “I was out there using drugs and alcohol to the point that I lost my housing and I knew I could go back to my mom and dad’s but I didn’t want to go there when I was such a mess.” Michelle went on to say that she was able to disclose to the shelter about her drug use but was not ready at that time to tell her family.

Barb also had a shock when she was not able to rely on her parents in the same ways that her siblings have been able to. Barb spoke about the ease with which her siblings moved in and out of her parent’s home and about the shock she felt when they were unwilling to allow her to move in when she left a treatment facility. Barb was quick to recognize that the reason her parents were unwilling to open their home to her was because of her drug addiction, “I’ve been to a place that they have never been to with the drugs so I can understand and I can’t blame them.” She went on to explain that her family was unhappy that she had not stayed for the entire treatment program.

Addictions add another dimension to the ways that families are able (or unable) to relate to each other. This happens because often the whole family feels pain due to addiction and has been shut out by the person with addiction issues. There are almost always past betrayals that remain unresolved, eroding the trust that may have existed in the past. At the root of ‘getting clean’ people tend to find self loathing while they make sense of the people that they hurt during their addictions and learn what led them to the
behaviors in the first place. These emotions can make it even more difficult to ask for support in troublesome times. Compounding the self loathing and guilt about past behaviors are the ways that family members may hold them accountable for past actions and ask them to explain and or work through past betrayals and broken trust. This can be truly insurmountable to someone trying to live sober.

**Family Abuse**

The area of the interviews that most clearly articulated the fallacy of family as a safe place or family as refuge was the area of past abuse. These stories were recounted from seemingly unrelated questions, but in retrospect, they were important in my understanding that these women simply could not trust their families. Many of the respondents self disclosed that they had suffered horrible abuse from the people that they understood as their protectors. Often the family ends up being the least safe site for people. This is also a gendered issue with many of the women disclosing sexual abuse and talking about the ways that they were expected to be ‘good girls’ and keep quiet about the variety of ways that they were abused and mistreated. The women spoke of terrible abuse at the hands of their families, which show that it would be impossible to rely on these people for support. Mickey stated,

> I was put on the street when I was nine years old for prostitution when I was nine years old from my parents… My parent’s friends for prostitution and stuff used me like that. I remember waking up when I was about nine years old I guess, and there was four guys in bed with me and my dad was one of them and they had me tied down and stuff like that.

Despite Mickey’s desire to have a relationship with her family and be able to count on them to help her she indicated that the way her siblings recall the abuse makes that difficult for her, “The pressure me to forget about the past, like it never happened.” Barb
recollected a similar experience about talking to her siblings about the violent outbreaks her schizophrenic father had when they were young,

I was always the black sheep in the family, I was always the one ... all of the stuff that was going on and to this day I am the one that. My siblings do not talk about the abuse at all to anybody. Maybe my sister in law maybe knows, but it's something that we're all the best of friends now and we'll all get together and you know ... they, it's almost like a joke, they will say remember how psycho dad was? Ha-ha and it's like a joke. Never do we talk about the trauma that it did, it's like a joke. The impact on them is the same as the impact on me but I don’t think they admit it. Or even realize that it affected them or impacted them.

Although not all the respondents had suffered abuse at the hands of their families, they all had issues that made those relationships difficult to navigate and understand. Many of the women were trying desperately to not reproduce those same problems with their own children.

Some of the women were able to admit that they were part of the problem in their abusive familial relationships. Donaghy spoke of her tumultuous relationship with her estranged husband, who battles his own addictions and has been consistently unfaithful to her,

I do have a problem, but it seems it’s much more prominent when he’s in my life because of the feeling of inadequacy and what’s wrong with me and I’m not good enough don’t go away when you’re around it all the time...Last year I had a huge relapse because I knew he was seeing someone else again and he had been talking to my family and telling them it’s all in my head and stuff like that. And this is the sort of stuff that’s been going on for years. So there’s no trust and no mutual respect and it’s just a huge co-dependent relationship for everybody.

The interviews all pointed to problematic family relationships for a number of reasons. The relationships were not strong enough to sustain any length of time that they were depended on for financial or emotional support for the most part. These narratives show
that not everyone is able to rely on their family in times of crisis in order to remedy those crises. Often the women who come to the shelter are coming from situations of trauma and therefore the family unit is actually the place that represents the reasons they ended up seeking shelter. Many of the women talked about people in their family that are missing or have not been heard from in years. Frequent moving makes staying in touch difficult for both parties. Conflict between roommates, deplorable living conditions, and inability to pay rent among other reasons made these women move frequently. This makes it difficult for other people to contact them through mail or stopping by to visit (because many of the women cannot afford a phone). Many of the women do not contact everyone in their lives every time they move because it is embarrassing and not high on their list of priorities. Statistics Canada published a report that showed people who have been unemployed are more likely to move frequently (Finnie 2000). Even if the people were trying to contact everyone each time they moved, it is likely that some people will be lost in the shuffle.

The fact that these women are not able to rely on their families for support when they face trouble is not in itself problematic, but the way that these women internalize that lack of support and the way that they understand public perception of that lack of support can turn into a downward spiral for them. There are several factors at play here that intersect and make it difficult for women in crisis to rely on their families. First of all there is a class aspect which means that not all families are able to extend support to those in need if they are also struggling to make ends meet. There are also assumptions that the family is a safe haven and should be relied on as a first defense against poverty, homelessness and crisis. It is irresponsibe to make that assumption, as not all people are
willing and able to call on those networks, especially not for extended periods of time. Addiction to alcohol and drugs severely compromises family relationships and alters people's willingness and ability to lend a hand. Most importantly, the lack of affordable and safe housing means that even if families do help their struggling sister/mother/daughter/aunt, she will likely be in a similar situation in a short period of time due to the inadequate resources and housing available to her. In addition to all of the emotional turmoil that accompanies past abuse, problems of addiction, and dealing with poverty, being hungry, and searching for shelter, these women are also dealing with feeling supremely isolated. This isolation and the feeling that this is their own personal problem that they have somehow created make it very difficult to find hope or feel worthy of help at all.
CHAPTER FIVE

"I do not wish to treat friendships daintily, but with the roughest courage. When they are real, they are not glass threads or frost-work, but the solidest thing we know."
~Ralph Waldo Emerson

Friend and Service Networks

Throughout my time as a volunteer and paid advocate at the local women’s crisis shelter, I saw women come in from all walks of life and quickly bond together. I was often surprised at the speed at which these friendships formed and the depth they appeared to have. I wondered how long term those relationships would be after the artificial, forced camaraderie in the shelter was no longer present. I worried about the women who depended on these new-found friends for survival after they left the shelter. These women made promises to each other while in the shelter to share accommodations, to help with transportation, to share babysitting schedules, help maintain sobriety and split their groceries. I was hesitant to believe that these were lasting relationships that were forged in the shelter and these observations were part of what motivated this project. When I asked questions about these friendships, I found that I had a very different understanding of the relationships than the women interviewed. In this chapter, I explore the ways that women understand their relationships with other shelter guests, discuss the stereotypes of the deserving and undeserving poor and outline the trouble the

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45 Many of the rooms are shared and the common areas make it easy to spend time together. The women have to eat in the dining room and the kitchen staff insists that the television be off while eating.
46 There are different types of friendships (or types of social capital) such as bridging and bonding. These networks are only useful to remedy poverty or unemployment when the relationships are cross-class.
interviewees had making patchwork plans to cope with public policy requirements, service providers, charity and friends.

I outlined in the last chapter the trouble the respondents indicated they faced when trying to rely on their families as a way to cope with life crises. If the best solution to financial hard times and housing crises is to rely on personal networks, I was certain that these women would discuss the ways that they turned to friends and acquaintances to give them a hand. People in crisis would understandably be more reliant on their social networks in particular in a context in which public services are scaled back.

In the Niagara region over the last five years, many not for profit services for people living in poverty have been threatened or have closed for a short period of time, such as Start Me Up Niagara, Families Helping Families, Out of the Cold, and The YWCA in Niagara Falls. There have also been changes to eligibility for the local women’s detoxification center and many surrounding area treatment centers. People who are using methadone as prescribed are no longer eligible to use these services as it is now considered drug use by those facilities. In addition, a local transitional house for women in recovery from drug addiction now requires residents to stop smoking cigarettes for three months prior to moving in. Local food banks have been vocal about the difficulties they have in keeping enough food on the shelves for their clients. Changes to funding eligibility establish shelters and other service providers as places that can attempt to meet basic needs, but not as sites that can offer long term programs or potential solutions (Start Me Up Niagara 2006). The fact that non-profit agencies are fighting for funding leads agencies to ‘compete’ and impedes community building and easy referrals. These
declines in community agencies and services suggested that the women interviewed would be more likely to rely on their friends as solutions to life crises.

As the quote at the beginning of this chapter suggests, the strength of friendships as unshakeable is problematic because it assumes that everyone has ‘real friends’. It is not necessary that all people have friendship networks that they can rely on in this manner; in fact, the most marginalized people are least likely to have these relationships. It stands to reason that the women who ended up at the shelter had already exhausted their established friend networks (if they had existed in the first place) and would therefore form new networks. I imagined that the women would speak of the new friends they made in the shelter as a huge help in overcoming their precarious housing problems. This is not what they disclosed. In contrast, the women indicated that not only were they often cut off from their closest friends (from before the time that they were in the shelter), unable to rely on them during their most needy times, but that they did not make any new friends at the shelter. The women talked about their disappointment about not being able to rely on these people in different terms than when they discussed their families, but the sentiment was the same. The women felt isolated and many indicated that they wished they felt more connected to their communities.

My predictions about the fragile nature of the shelter relationships were confirmed during the interviews. The women distanced themselves from the other guests who were at the shelter with them, indicating that they had not made friends with any of the other women during their stay. Many of them said that they kept to themselves throughout their time at the shelter. Instead of acknowledging that the friendship ties were breakable, the respondents acted as if the ties had never existed. It may be that the
women have forgotten the relationships, wanted to put distance between themselves and other women at the shelter, or that they truly did not find them important. Regardless of the motivation, they were not remembered as helpful in the process of becoming housed, comforted, employed or sober.

**Othering**

The overwhelming majority of respondents made it clear that they were somehow different from the other people who showed up at the shelter doors. In other work about homeless shelters (for example Liebow 1993), many of the respondents also indicated that there were fundamental differences between themselves and the other people using the shelter system. I did not anticipate this same experience at this particular shelter because the women appeared to be friendly and helpful to each other and because the women are guaranteed their bed once they have completed their intake⁴⁷. The interviewed women described the other women as different, lazy, and unsavory. This process of othering⁴⁸ happened in a variety of ways. Some women did not self-identify as homeless⁴⁹ in the way that they identified the other guests, and some women identified the reasons that other women came to the shelter as personal problems and bad decisions.

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⁴⁷ At many shelters, the beds are assigned nightly on a first come, first serve basis. The shelter that this research revolves around does not use that system which may alleviate some resentment or competition between guests.

⁴⁸ Spivak (1988) uses the term ‘othering’ to show how a group is able to self-identify as positive by making another group stigmatized. In this case, the women ‘other’ the other guests at the shelter by seeing everyone else as a homogeneous group of people that are somehow beneath them.

⁴⁹ One problem with the literature about homelessness is the lack of consensus about the definition of ‘homeless’. Canadian National Homeless Initiative defines homelessness as “any person, family, or household that has no fixed address” (2007) absolute homelessness is defined as having no shelter and relative homelessness is defined as people living in places that are inadequate in terms of space or safety (http://www.share-international.org/archives/homelessness/hl-ch_Canada.htm).
whereas they self identified as blameless in getting there. The women made judgments about whether or not a person received social assistance (welfare/Ontario Works), and most of the respondents made distinctions based on drug use\(^{50}\).

The participants \textit{all} described the period of time that they were in the shelter as a time that they kept to themselves. As an observer, it appears that the guests in the facility form quick and close bonds that include trips out to the convenience store and promises of future support in terms of car rides, time spent together and exchange of goods. There are so few people who come to the shelter who do not socialize with the other guests (or who appear to ‘keep to themselves’) that the staff would likely be able to list them from memory. There is a clear break in the way that the relationships appear from the outside and the way that the guests remember them after the fact\(^{51}\). Looking back on their experiences at the shelter, the women typically described the time as follows:

You know what, it’s sad to say but I just passed by myself with most of them. You know what, there were people there that I didn’t want to be involved with, people there that I didn’t want to get to know and I think that the two that I did click with and I was there more than a month and a half. Those are the two that I am still in contact with now. There’s others that I see come and go, but my desire to have any more than that sort of relationship with them is nil. (Donaghy, 47, mother of two teenage children, came to the shelter following a suicide attempt in an effort to get sober).

Donaghy’s comments indicate that she did not make an effort to get to know the majority of the other women and that she felt some guilt about that choice. Her feelings of guilt may have been related to the fact that she had already discussed, at length, the experience

\(^{50}\) The distinctions were about people who used drugs versus those who did not, and based on the type of drugs used or the activities (such as prostitution) people were willing to do to obtain drugs.

\(^{51}\) The women had left the shelter a few days before the interview up to a year and a half beforehand. This lapse in time may cause some inconsistencies in the way the events were recalled.
of being mistreated by people who she perceived as thinking they were better than her and she was now projecting the same assumptions onto the other guests at the shelter. There is an underlying message in her comment that the people she was avoiding at the shelter were not good people, and that they were unpleasant and unworthy of her time. She went on to say under what circumstances she would speak to the other residents, making it very clear that she was not building relationships with the other women and certainly would not be seen outside of the shelter with them. Donaghy’s thoughts indicate that while it may appear to an outsider that the women are developing relationships, they may be being polite to each other because they are sharing small spaces and are all equally regulated (for example, where they are allowed to smoke on the property, what time they must retire to their rooms, when they can eat their meals and so forth).

Neysmith, Bezanson and O’Connell (2005) had similar findings in regards to the way that their participants understood other people accessing public services; the other people represented the reasons that the participants had trouble receiving the services. This way of distancing oneself from other people in similar positions happens because of dominant discourses about people on welfare, or receiving other state supports (Neysmith, Bezanson & O’Connell 2005).

I had to be around them. It was different in the sense that if I wanted a cigarette those people were out there so I would converse with them. Or when I was in the dining room I would have a conversation but I wouldn’t, no. Even when I was there I wouldn’t go to Tim Horton’s for coffee with them. (Donaghy)

Tracy talked about her time at the shelter and indicated that she had been willing to make friends with the other women living there at the same time and would have liked to rely on them, but outlined that it did not happen because she was not like them,
Not really because they’re all pretty much in the same position or they’re on this track and I’m on this track...the thing is that there is a lot of addiction and I had the addiction problem, well somebody else’s that I was trying to get away from...you wake up with the smell of crack coming out of somebody’s [shelter] room and you think, it’s still there, what are you guys stupid? You’re coming for help and you’re not taking it? (Tracy, 51, came to the shelter following her divorce and subsequent break up coupled with chronic pain and stopping her work).

Tracy stated that she would have liked to have a relationship with other women whom she met at the shelter but also found it difficult because she had mental health problems that often led her to isolate herself. She also set herself apart from other shelter guests by indicating that they were ungrateful and foolish for not taking advantage of the shelter by continuing their drug use. Tracy stated that she felt comfortable speaking with the staff members and believed that they were the people on whom she continued to rely for emotional support.

The admissions of the women that they did not have common ground or relationships with the other shelter guests foreshadows a common problem once the women leave the shelter. There are services (such as Supporting Community Programs Initiatives) that match up women at the shelter to move into apartments together in order to split the living expenses and have some shelter support for their first year after being in the shelter. Often the people who are matched together find it impossible to live together and one (or both) women will leave the program and return to the shelter or find alternate housing. Perhaps this fighting occurs because the depth of the relationships has been misjudged and the women are unwilling to mention that they are not happy with the roommate pairing for fear that they will lose the opportunity altogether. It is difficult to

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52 People with mental health problems are at a high risk for being homeless (Nova, Brown & Gallant 1999).
track the frequency that this happens in informal sharing of apartments that are not regulated by the shelter or how often women feel they must move out of a rooming house when another past guest moves into that space with her.

The problems that are inherent with living with other people are particularly problematic for the women who had decided to share costs or rental space as a strategy to make ends meet living on tight budgets. Although there are no explicit expectations that people living in poverty are meant to share space as a coping strategy, it is implicit in the small amount of money provided by social assistance for rent/housing, the recommendations of shelter staff and the finances available to those people working at low wage jobs. In order to survive, many people must live together in small spaces, which puts further strain on friendships and therefore they disintegrate. People with high incomes have the same conflicts about shared space and household bills but have the ability to cope with it differently through their financial position (they can afford to take a night out, eat elsewhere, etc.).

Tabitha talked about her negative social experience of being in the shelter with the other women. She distanced herself from the other guests by indicating that she was working everyday, which she felt led to a lot of people asking her to lend them things like cigarettes and money. Tabitha relied heavily on common stereotypes of poor/homeless people as lazy and dependent, which may have helped her to distance herself from identifying as homeless because she classified herself as motivated and hard working (and appeared to think the two were mutually exclusive). She also said she likely would not have spoken to the other women if it were not for her daughter (many of the shelter guests liked her personable teenaged daughter and her daughter enjoyed their attention).
Tabitha talked about the stigma involved with being at a shelter, “even walking up to the shelter can be embarrassing. But it makes you feel very vulnerable…[the rules] make a person feel worse.” Tabitha stated that she would not tell people that she was staying at a shelter because of the judgment that she would face and that she felt distraught for her daughter who had to lie to friends about where they lived in order to avoid embarrassment. The embarrassment made both of them to spend time by themselves while at the shelter. Tabitha made statements throughout her interview that made it clear that she felt she was in a completely different situation than the other women who came to the shelter. She felt that she was there due to no fault of her own (her family was in the shelter because they were seeking safety while waiting for her daughter to testify in a criminal trial) and that it was unfortunate that her daughters\(^5^3\) had to be exposed to such unsavory characters while they were staying in the shelter.

Mickey also kept to herself while at the shelter but explained that, “I’m not really a social person because I was never, ever taught how to socialize and stuff.” She has distanced herself from some of the women who attempted to be her friend because she thought that anyone who talked to her was looking for her to do something and felt skeptical of offers of friendship. Mickey indicated that a lot of the guests who came to the shelter were in a place where they wanted to benefit from any relationship they had instead of reciprocating. This feeling that Mickey had that many of the women coming through the shelter doors would exploit her is, in part, because there are a lack of public and not for profit services in the area. Many of women at the shelter are ‘in competition’

\(^{53}\) Although Tabitha moved out of the shelter into housing with only one child, she had come to the shelter with two of her daughters and during her stay there, her other daughter (and grandson) came to the shelter seeking safety as well.
with each other for spots in subsidized housing programs (Niagara Regional Housing), transitional housing (through the shelter), assisted housing (Supporting Community Programs Initiative), for time with counselors, places in treatment programs, and for donations from a number of community agencies. There are simply not enough resources, which may contribute to the women feeling like all the other women are out to get whatever they can from anybody.

Other guests also self-identified as different from the other women but stated they were able to at least communicate with them. One woman (Barb) admitted that she still spoke to people whom she met while at the shelter (and in subsequent transitional housing), but was careful to distance herself from them when asked if she would rely on any of them for support because the other guest are all unable to help her in the ways that she needed support. Michelle also talked about not wanting to get involved with anybody’s past or business, “no ‘cause I didn’t really know any of them and I didn’t want to get to know them because I didn’t know about their past.” Michelle’s comment shows that she is not able to make long lasting bonds with people for fear that the problems that propelled them to the shelter will affect her own ability to move forward or that they will need to rely on her for support that she isn’t able to give them.

There were some respondents who gave surprising answers about their relationships with the other guests. Chloe stayed at the shelter for a period of three months and became a friendly face to most of the guests, many of whom treated her warmly and tried to protect her in general from many of the mistakes that they had made themselves. Many of the older guests appeared to have a lot invested in Chloe and believed that she could achieve things that they had not themselves. Chloe’s response
about her relationships with other guests was surprising because she always appeared to be social and involved with other people’s day-to-day lives,

I mostly stuck to myself. I didn’t know anybody’s story and I didn’t want to get involved in anybody’s stuff. I made a couple of friends there but I still stuck to myself and the shelter and if they were doing something bad, I didn’t want to be a part of it... Like I said, there were a couple of people that we’d actually sit and watch a movie together that were cool. I’d dye their hair or whatever... we didn’t go outside and hang out with each other it was more inside the shelter. (Chloe, 19, came to the shelter after family breakdown and her mother moved to another province).

The experience that Chloe remembers as being separated from other guests is in direct opposition to the way that shelter staff viewed her socializing. She also made it clear that she had not been able to maintain even peripheral friendships with people (or staff) from the shelter when she described her subsequent problematic living situations that she faced alone. Chloe seemed surprised at my mentioning that she could have returned to the shelter or called on her acquaintances from that time when she described being kicked out of a friend’s house, dealing with an abusive, addicted roommate and the trouble of finding suitable housing yet again. When Chloe talked about all the trouble she had with her living situations after the shelter, it became clear that the purpose of the shelter service was not articulated well to her. Her feeling isolated in bad living situations while involved with social services (Ontario Works/welfare) and her school indicates that those people in frequent contact with her were also over-taxed if they were not able to pick up on her warning signs and offer her aid. Chloe was not the only person who indicated that she felt she could not return to the shelter because she had used up all of her hostel days (as explored in chapter two). Many of the women touched on the fact that the shelter staff often appeared busy and over-worked which made the guests reluctant to come for
support as often as they would have liked to. This means that often the women are not able to rely on service providers in lieu of their friend relationships.

Not all of the women were as adamant that they were completely different from other guests. Heather was more open about the similarities she had with the other people who were at the shelter when she was there but indicated that they were not trustworthy,

No, I don’t rely on other people that I’ve met through the shelter because a lot of them are there under the same circumstances I was [dealing with addictions] and I’m just in a different place. Some people get to a good position and others are having difficulties like I find myself in a lot of times so I choose to pretty much, I associate with a lot of different women that are there but pretty much my life is my life and theirs is theirs...’cause like I said a lot of the people are still messed up -most of them, except for the same common problems, one addiction or another or family problems or whatever (pause) they’re just (pause) different from me... I like to be a very independent woman. I have been most of my life and a lot of the women that I’ve met, present or past guests there, they’re women that I didn’t have much time for when I was a normal, put together woman because they would prefer to have someone do everything for them and I’m not that kind of person. I’d prefer, if I can do it by myself I’m damn well gonna. And I try not to rely on people to do it, especially men. (Heather, 39, relocated to the city and came to the shelter when she was trying to get sober).

While Heather was able to see overlap between herself and the other guests, she fell back on the discourse of dependence when she talked about other guests. She indicated that she sometimes kept her distance from the other women because she got frustrated by their dependence and did not want to be seen as dependent herself, especially not on men. This has prompted her to work a lot of hours and forgo drug treatment that would take her away from her job. This may be because she is concerned about the level of support (and the stability of that support) she would receive from social programs. Heather is a prime example of a person who has watched the shortcomings of support programs such as Families and Children Services (FACS). FACS has been the
custodian of her teenage daughter (15 years old) for months but had not been paying anyone support for her. Heather spent a great deal of time negotiating with FACS about getting some financial support sent to her daughter so that she would be able to secure shelter. Legally, Heather was not allowed to have her live in her space but her daughter did not have another address or another guardian who was supporting her financially. Heather was understandably concerned that she might also lose benefits if she was dependent only on social assistance (OW) and so she continued to work long hours to the detriment of her sobriety.

**Deserving versus Undeserving Poor**

Often the respondents were clear about the reason that they decided not to become involved with other guests at the shelter. There appeared to be a stereotype that people using shelters must be addicted, uneducated and unpleasant. In order to avoid taking on that identity or re-evaluating that assumption, women often stated they had not interacted with the other people in the shelter. Tabitha spent the better part of a year in various shelters across Ontario. She made a distinction between her family and the other people who used shelters, and the way that service providers treat shelter users, “…it backfired on them [the shelter staff at an out of town shelter] because I don’t drink, I don’t do drugs, I don’t beat my kids.” Tabitha was not the only woman who fell back on these assumptions about people in the shelter. It was clear that the people accessing shelter services felt that the providers imagined the worst of them and that they personally were the exception to the rule.

The way that the women spoke about the other guests made it very clear that they were unable to rely on their friendships made at the shelter for aid in terms of avoiding
recurring homelessness or poverty. The shelter offered a place where the women could meet people that were not initially in their social circles and that might have information about different social programs, employment, childcare arrangement and other programs. The women did not call on these resources because they saw themselves as somehow different from the other shelter guests and usually placed themselves on a hierarchy where they personally were close to the top. The statements that these women made about the other guests makes it clear that shelter users cannot easily or consistently rely on other shelter users to increase their social capital or to deal with life crises.

The othering went beyond just the people that the women met at the shelter to the people that they encountered while trying to access services. Often women made statements about their mistreatment by service providers and expressed their hurt feelings or anger because they saw themselves as different from the other people seeking assistance. Often the women talked about their belief that the services should not be used unless it was a last resort and they resented being treated like ‘charity cases’ who had not made any other efforts. The women spoke about the discrimination they had experienced while at the same time falling back on many of the same stereotypes when describing other people accessing services. There was a strong underlying dialogue about the deserving versus undeserving poor in many of the responses. The stigma attached and the punitive way that poor people are labeled divide people into classes; the ‘underclass’ becomes less important than the middle class. Gans (1995 pg 1) discusses this phenomenon in terms of labeling.

The generic label is “undeserving,” the undeserving poor being thought so morally deficient that they are not deserving of any economic or other assistance. Furthermore, being labeled undeserving reduces their chances of becoming either “deserving poor” or of escaping poverty altogether.
In addition to making it difficult for the poor person to shed the label and move beyond poverty, this labeling makes it easier for politicians to avoid making inclusive policies and allows more wealthy citizens to blame the person living in poverty for their plight based on poor morals and lack of work ethic. Fraser (1997) discusses the issue of poverty and social assistance in terms of dependency. By paying an amount of assistance that allowed people live without suffering and to meet their needs, the dependency they experience on exploitative jobs and relationships would be alleviated somewhat (Fraser 1997). She goes on to advocate benefits that are not contingent on a male breadwinner, female caregiver model (Fraser 1997). The interviewees were explicit about the ways that other guests were immoral in their eyes and in so doing, attempted to position themselves as unlike other shelter guests, full of sound morals and work ethic.

The women usually understood themselves as deserving and in need of aid whereas other women who accessed services were seen as undeserving and cheating the system. The women mentioned the stigma that went along with receiving government benefits and their desire to not have other people look at them as if they were taking advantage of that help. Mickey said,

I lived on Ontario Works [welfare] when I first moved up here. I was very fortunate that when I went to work I was able to get off OW. I was really, really happy about that. That’s when I left the food bank as well so I went in and I said I was working and no longer needed their help and I appreciate all you’ve done for me and then when I went over this morning I felt low as like as low as can be. It’s like, no I shouldn’t feel that just because I do need it now. It’s like I couldn’t do it. It’s not like I abused it when I did use it and they explained it to me that they could see I didn’t abuse it when I was working because you know how many people are out

54 This often took the form of discussing what drugs a woman was addicted to and what she was willing to do to get the drugs. The women judged each other based on their child custody status and perceived promiscuity.
there that are working that don’t come in and tell us that they are getting from us and getting from other places. I don’t believe in all that, taking advantage of those places. I actually got a big thing today from the food bank and I’ve given it to the shelter. I couldn’t use it so there’s no sense keeping it. (Mickey, 47, came to the shelter because of a relapse, lives in the shelter’s transitional housing.)

Mickey’s explicit mention that she did not abuse the system and take advantage of the Ontario Works money or the food bank indicates that she believes many people do take advantage. This ends up being a process whereby those in the most precarious situations are policing the ways that other people in precarious situations use social supports (government transfers and church charities). It is most unfortunate that these women are making judgments about each other when over seventy-five percent of people access food banks and church food vouchers are receiving social assistance (welfare) because it is not possible to pay rent and buy food on the assistance levels (Campbell 2001).

Donaghy talked about how she felt receiving government assistance, “It’s a bit of a stigma for me, I’ve worked all my life, for me being on welfare, I don’t care what you call it, it’s welfare and it hurts my self-esteem.” This was a sentiment that many women echoed. The perception that a person receiving assistance is automatically abusing the system contributes the feeling of lowered self-esteem that the women discussed. The women wanted me to understand that they had usually been working (or productive members of society, as they often said) but that they were temporarily getting OW or ODSP benefits. A regional study reinforces that over 90% of homeless people surveyed in the Niagara region had been in the formal labour market prior to becoming homeless (Start Me Up Niagara 2006). Donaghy’s (and other respondents’) self-loathing about receiving assistance is in part due to the discourse of deserving and undeserving poor.
Many of the respondents share the feeling that people who have OW assistance were lazy and unmotivated and therefore did not deserve to have government aid\(^{55}\) (Vaillant 1997). The respondents expressed discomfort at also being a welfare recipient and some of that discomfort was because they did not want to be part of the undeserving poor. Further, many of the women were trying to find employment that would make it possible for them to get by without assistance but had difficulty doing that either because of the high cost of living with their children (and low wages available to them) or the inconsistencies in their employment due to addiction (leaving them unattractive to employers). As able-bodied women, they expected other able bodied women to work to afford living expenses, and felt guilt and shame about receiving assistance themselves.

The women talked about feeling judged during their meetings with service providers and noted that they sometimes had barriers to getting apartments that they were interested in due to their source of income. Although landlords are not legally allowed to make judgments based on source of income, often once the women ask a landlord to fill out an Intent to Rent\(^{56}\) (which is necessary to secure funds for the rent portion of their Ontario Works cheque or Community Start Up Benefit) they are told that the apartment is no longer available. When this occurs, women at the shelter are told that they are welcome to make a complaint about that particular landlord but often decide not to do so because it may reinforce that landlord’s perceptions about people receiving assistance.

\(^{55}\) Any changes to this sentiment will be a long time coming in Ontario after Mike Harris’ Common Sense Revolution, the switch to a workfare program and many comments about pulling oneself up by the bootstraps and the problems with taxpayers paying for beer for people receiving Mother’s Allowance.

\(^{56}\) When a person is receiving Ontario Works s/he must have his/her potential landlord fill out a form indicating the amount of rent, the address and the landlord’s telephone number. Ontario Works will not release a cheque without this Intent to Rent filled out.
being troublemakers. Many women at the shelter have stated that they do not wish to make a fuss about the treatment because they already feel bad about themselves after not getting the intended apartment.

Some of the respondents thought that service providers also judged them. In fact, they went so far as to say that the service providers sometimes tried to sabotage them. One woman (June) indicated that she believed the service providers would intentionally hold back money that she believed she was eligible\(^5\) for,

There’s more money that they can give but they’re not giving it. Like there are other amounts that they can give, there are things that you can ask for but they don’t tell people to ask for it. (June, 38, came to the shelter after her divorce, has bi-polar disorder).

Other women also felt that the front line service providers were undermining them by withdrawing professional support once the woman acted as the service provider suggested. Tracy was in this situation. She outlined her experience to me of waiting to be eligible for ODSP over the last five months before the interview. She stated she was prompted to apply for ODSP by her OW worker and now was ineligible to work at all because it would eliminate her chance at being accepted to ODSP. She is not alone in facing major obstacles accessing disability benefits as Start Me Up Niagara (2006) indicate in a report about homelessness and employment barriers. Her struggle to make ends meet on her OW cheque alone made her feel that the service providers were out to get her. “I can’t last on this money, I just can’t last. Today’s the 5\(^{th}\) and I had a buck left in my pocket”. Tracy felt she had been set up by her OW worker who told her to apply

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\(^5\) June is probably referring to the Special Diet Allowance in this statement. The Special Diet Allowance is additional funds available to people receiving social assistance benefits who have a doctor’s note explaining a medical condition that requires certain foods (such as diabetes, AIDS, etc.)
for ODSP because she had not believed it would take so long to be approved. She was worried that she could not make ends meet but felt she could not withdraw her application because further judgments would then be made about her motivation to apply for the additional funds. Tracy went on to describe the ways that she would deal with not having any money left from her assistance cheque by accessing community charity services. The process she outlined indicated that she felt the people offering the aid did not think she deserved it or that she was taking advantage of them,

They said use your (name of provider) this month and then come to see us again in a month. When I went to (church) the lady in there just ran me right down, she said, 'well you’ve used us before you know, we’re not here to just give, give, give' And then you actually go and get the voucher and they say ‘you should use us then (service provider)’ but the lady in the office, the lady on the phone, runs you down like you’re a piece of dirt.

(Tracy)

Tracy’s explanation about juggling aid from different places (in this case, a church and a non profit community agency) in order to get by shows that there is a built-in shortfall to the social assistance policies. All of the women discussed this band-aid solution to some extent. Poppendieck (1999) states that this culture of charity is highly problematic because it strips people of entitlement and erodes the responsibility of government bodies to make consistent policies that address the real issues of poverty. Chloe talked about needing to access services in order to top up what her social assistance benefits allowed her as well. She also talked about her experience of being judged by service providers and her frustration at having to receive assistance,

I think people think they’re better than that. But in actuality we’re not homeless by choice, we’re homeless because of certain circumstances and that’s not our fault. In my case it’s not my fault and you know me. In some cases it might be their fault, you don’t know someone’s life story and you should be considerate. For example, I was at (service provider) with one of my youth counselors and the lady was so rude to me it was unbelievable.
She treated me like I was some bum on the street who had no job, who didn’t care about my appearance and she was very, very rude and she doesn’t know my circumstances and she shouldn’t be judging and I think a lot of people do that. (Chloe, 19, came to the shelter following family breakdown when her mother left the province).

These quotes reinforce what Mullaly (2002) claims about oppression in social work. Mullaly states that many social workers tell new students that the theoretical knowledge they acquire in school is useless in the work they will do, and that they must learn to trust their guts (2002). This means that people are making service decisions based on the unquestioned norms and behaviours that rule the dominant culture’s understanding of poverty. Often the people on both sides of the service desk are closer in income and life situation than the client could imagine due to very low wages in the social service field (Mullaly 2002). This creates a tension and resentment that is often manifested in mistreatment by service staff. People who have not been trained (volunteers) sometimes intensify the mistreatment. Many churches and service groups offer patchwork aid to take the place of comprehensive social policies (such as food banks, donations, soup kitchens etc.) but the people working at those places are often doing so for service to the community and or church. This can translate into resentment, pity and disgust, all of which are acutely felt by those people needing to access the services.

There was a theme in the interviews about the shared characteristics of other people who received assistance. There was also a heavy reliance on stereotypical notions of what it meant to be homeless. Despite the preamble that I was classifying any time staying at the shelter as a time that a woman had been homeless, many women did not self identify as ever having been homeless. The denial of ever being homeless appeared to be another way that the respondents distanced themselves from the other women at the
shelter. This distancing happened at the same time that the women made judgments about who was homeless and what characteristics homeless people shared. During the interview process some women grappled with the identity of a homeless woman as illustrated below. Sara was hesitant to admit that she had been homeless,

I don’t know, I haven’t really, really, really, really been, I guess you could classify it as being homeless, but I don’t really think I was homeless ‘cause I had the support because I didn’t want to live on the streets. I found, I guess it is a homeless shelter, coincidence, but I guess I don’t classify it as experiencing sleeping outside. I had the resources right in front of my face. (Sara, 20s, came to the shelter following a break-up).

Stephanie echoed this despite not having had an address for months at a time,

I don’t know. Like I don’t really know what it’s like to be homeless. I never... I would have never ended up on the streets if it wasn’t for the shelter. There are other people that would though ... I don’t really understand why people are homeless with the stuff that we have. (Stephanie, 19, has been in and out of the shelter since she was 16, living in co-op housing with her new son).

Many of the women discussed how many options were available to people and then wondered how anyone could get to the point that they would sleep outdoors. There were only three respondents that had slept outside during their periods of homelessness so it was easier for the other women to understand their experiences as ‘being between apartments’ or ‘in a tough spot’. By naming homelessness anything other than being homeless, it appears it was easier for the women to not get angry about the situation. Each woman seemed to tell herself a story about what brought her to the shelter that did not fit with the reasons that other women used the shelter. This way of explaining the situation worked against a collective understanding of a variety of problems associated with homelessness and impeded a level of anger that would have made them look for changes in the system.
Chloe also talked about not wanting to be understood as homeless, “I didn’t want to go to a place like that but there was nowhere else to go.” The majority of the women appeared to have strong ideas about homelessness that included sleeping outside, being unclean and having a mental illness. There were assumptions that the women made easily about other guests and the women that slept outside when they were homeless. Chloe indicated that she was not like other people that needed social services in that she cared about her appearance and was not a bum. She feels people who are homeless or living in poverty are dirty bums. Mickey shared that sentiment even though she admitted to a period of time in her life when she slept in a cardboard box.

In the midst of talking about judgment, many of the women talked about feelings of indebtedness to the places that had helped them. The women spoke of being grateful for their time at the shelter and wanting to return to there to speak with the staff about their progress or their trials and tribulations. Many of the women felt that they were unable to do so because the shelter staff appeared so frazzled and busy with new guests. This made them talk about feeling judged that the shelter had already helped them and therefore they should not continue to seek support there.

The respondents made it clear that they were unable to consistently rely on family or new-found friends from the shelter to get by. It appeared that because they were not able to rely on these people they might be able to get support from their old friends. This also was not the case. Sara says,

You can’t rely on your friends because they’ll backstab you or you’ll backstab them or they’ll just get sick of you. It’s bull crap you know. You really can’t rely on people, you’ve gotta do it for yourself you know? You can’t rely on nobody, not these days.
This sentiment was often repeated. All of the women were asked about their support networks and about who they turned to with good and bad news, they often looked surprised and had trouble coming up with a response. I started to offer examples of sharing items, getting rides, splitting fees and babysitting children. Still many of the women made it clear that they did not rely on anyone else because they would be let down. These are women who appear to be doing it on their own. For example, the extent that June saw her reliance on her roommates was that if someone was all out of butter then they could borrow some of hers or vice versa. This sharing of groceries did not extend to all items.

The way that the women spoke about their social networks outside of their kin networks made it clear that they were not able to rely on them during times of crisis with any regularity. While the respondents often fell back on discourse about family helping out family, they did not appear to have the same expectations about friends and acquaintances. The women also felt unable to require aid from many service providers and mentioned that even the places that were helpful were often too busy to really help.
CHAPTER SIX

"Remember the poor – it costs nothing" ~ Mark Twain.

The Future

This chapter explores the potential solutions that the women themselves offered in regards to sustainable policy supports, poverty, and homelessness. These suggestions are twinned with broader analysis and policy recommendations. When I asked the women to describe their experience of poverty and homelessness, they told me about policy barriers, unsupportive social networks and the ways in which they felt worthless. They concentrated on a broad sense of not being valued and of being perceived as deviant. When I asked them what policymakers, politicians, and service providers should know about their personal realities in order to serve them better, the women responded about the shortcomings of existing policies. They also appeared to be proud of their own coping skills because they indicated they did not believe many of the people making policies to help people in their situations would be able to live their lives. In this section of the interviews, the resilience, tenacity, resourcefulness and strength of the women shone, despite many setbacks.

Participant Recommendations

It is a fallacy that homeless people should be able to rely on their networks in times of trouble as a first response. I anticipated that the women would respond that they had trouble relying on friends and family. At the very least I expected that the women would mention that they had been unable to temporarily move in with friends and family. I assumed that they would respond that they counted on government aid (such as welfare, shelters, subsidies etc.) when they were in crisis. In order to determine if the government
aid was adequate and if it was addressing their specific needs, I asked the women about what services they used and if they had problems or positive experiences they would share with me. The women answered my questions candidly and came up with recommendations to improve services. The following recommendations come directly from the respondent’s answers to the question, “What do you wish politicians and policy makers knew about what it was like to be homeless?” Overwhelmingly, the women explained that they just wanted to be seen as human (in the same way as those people making policies) and that they did not believe the politicians would be able to survive on the little funds that were available to them personally. There were variations in income due to the income source of the respondents (OW, ODSP, paid employment, EI and a select few were also receiving small amounts of money from family on top of their regular income). There were no significant variations in income linked to race, family class background, education level or addictive behaviours.

Some of the women had trouble defining themselves as having ever been homeless. Even when the question about homelessness was framed as anytime they came to the shelter, they still had difficulties identifying as a homeless person. Through talking about the experience of homelessness, it became clear that some of that hesitation about identifying themselves as homeless came from the women’s fear of facing the crisis unassisted,

It’s a little bit scary actually. It’s scary. It’s like I have to do this by myself, that’s what it is, it’s like a wake up call. You can’t depend on other people, especially who you’re dating or who you’re going to be living with. It is really, really hard. It is a wake up call. It was my wake up call, not being homeless but learning to fend for myself. It’s really, really, really hard. It’s really, really, really hard but you know what, it became easier and you gain control out of it (Sara, 21, came to the shelter as a result of a breakup with a woman she was living with).
The fear that the women experienced was a starting point for what services they believed needed to be implemented and what they wished service providers and policy makers knew about the realities of their existences. When asked about what they wish they could have done or what services they needed during their crises, the women came up with services that would be implemented by governments or agencies, not family or friend supports:

More housing. More buildings put up and stuff like that. More geared to income housing and stuff like that. Poverty, it's rough out there. It's hard out there these days. Society has a whole different meaning on life these days. Like look at the hospitals. There is a lot of homeless people and there is no need. There is enough money in the government that they should have housing for these people. And mental health? It's not very good either. Like these people walking the streets, they deserve to have a chance too... So it's horrible. I would love to see the government go out there for even a week, live on the streets for a week and see how they do...(Mickey, 47, repeat shelter guest who came to the shelter as a result of a relapse with alcohol).

Mickey's comments show that she believes homeless people are viewed as less important than other people. In her experience, she has seen many people who needed help finding housing turn to the hospital for a safe place to stay, which in turn comes with a mental health stigma. The mental health stigma comes from people who choose to enter the psychiatric ward in order to have a safe place to stay for 72 hours. Often people there are prescribed medications and then disclose the diagnoses and treatments in subsequent interactions with service providers. Mickey focused on the importance of affordable housing as a way of eradicating homelessness. She told me that the experience of being homeless is grueling and consuming and questioned the priorities of politicians and

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58 For example, the shelter intake asks clients if they have ever been diagnosed with a psychiatric condition and asks about time spent in any mental health facilities.
citizens who appeared to be content to ignore the problems of persistent poverty and homelessness.

The women were also very concerned with having their experience understood. Many of the respondents answered quickly that they wanted the politicians to try to live on their budgets, that they wanted to have other people comprehend how difficult their realities are on a day-to-day basis. This theme is in keeping with the experience that the women discussed in the earlier chapter about the judgments and stereotypes they faced. By imploring other people to understand their experience, they were trying to fight those stereotypes. The underlying message was that these women wanted to be seen as equal to ‘full citizens’. When Heather talked about what politicians needed to know, she said:

I would like to tell them that they need to put a whole lot more money into having places like the shelter so that there’s more locations... ‘cause there’s many more homeless people or women that have different either substance or problems or just emotional problems or just any kind, they need about (pause) five of them in each city (laughter). Because they can only house so many women at a time and so, and some people do, I mean they have a little bit of leeway there with the lengths of time you can stay if they know you’re trying to productively try to do something for yourself. But like there’s a lot, it only I think maybe at maximum can house somewhere between 15 to 20 people. I’m not sure of precise numbers but there’s a lot more people that need help... Oh I’d say definitely into crisis facilities like that because it has the support to help women that really want the help to straighten stuff out and start over. (Heather, 39, relocated to the city to go to a local detoxification center and then came to the shelter).

Heather is pointing to the problem that sometimes when a woman is prepared to ask for help, there is not space for her to access that help. In 2004, the use of shelters in the Niagara region increased by 220% (Morris 2004). The shelter that I met my interviewees in was frequently at full capacity in both 2005 and 2006 and often had a waiting list (Whittaker 2006). This lack of space (or potential to be turned away) is
particularly important for women fleeing abusive situations and for women who have made a decision to try to get sober. When a woman is told the shelter is full and that she must be put on a waiting list due to lack of space, she may not be able to make the same decision to leave her current situation again. Sometimes the women are not able to give a phone number to be reached at if a bed becomes available and often they do not call back. Heather talked about the window of opportunity for getting into a shelter and made it clear that when a woman was turned away, it was more significant to her than just asking her to return at a later date. There are small windows of opportunity for people leaving abusive situations or getting out of addiction and turning away a woman during that window may mean that she does not try to leave again.

Other respondents focused even more so on the desire to have people witness their experience. One woman explained that she would like politicians, policy makers and service providers to experience what it is like to be homeless so that they could be more compassionate and recognize homeless people as people too. A theme in the interviews was that the women had experienced mistreatment from service providers. The mistreatment ranged from the service provider being condescending about the women needing to access services to denial of services and outright disbelief about the women’s circumstances. This statement shows the bruising that one’s self esteem takes when they perceive other people’s judgment about them.

I would tell them to try it for themselves for a few days and really they do treat homeless people really bad. Try it for themselves. I think they would find that it is really bad. Try it for themselves; don’t judge until you’ve walked a mile in their shoes. Start looking at people as being human, not as homeless people. They’re still human, no matter what they are and they deserve to have a chance in life, they should be looked after (Tracy, 51, repeat shelter user who came to the shelter due to a divorce and inadequate housing).
Chloe echoed this sentiment of wanting politicians to understand her plight, but focused more on the difficulties of making ends meet on her small assistance cheque,

I would like them to know what it feels like to live on $400 a month and try to survive... Yeah I am getting $536 but I have to buy a bus pass and I have to buy groceries. I would like them to try to see that. It's so hard, like you have no idea. With all my bills and everything, I have $10 to live with for the whole month, like how am I supposed to live? ... I would love to see them try to live off that [Ontario Works]. They couldn’t do it. (Chloe, 19, came to the shelter when her mother moved back to a Western province and there was a breakdown with her grandparents where she had been living).

These responses speak not only to having more funds available and having people understand their experience, but also to feeling like they were personally valued. Many of the women expressed feeling that they are treated as less than human, inconsequential and as a financial drain on society. Tracy also indicated her concern about the amount of assistance that she received and the problems associated with the amount of money she had available. Tracy made links about the small rent allowance and the places that she could rent. She stated she often had to move because the accommodations were unsuitable but she had to rent them based on the rental prices. During the interview, Tracy talked about having to stay in a rented room after she knew she was being watched through holes in her walls. She talked about how she felt violated because her landlord would enter her room when she left the house but that she had to remain there because she had paid her rent for the month and would not be eligible for the rental allowance even if she found a more suitable place.

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59 Often people are told to return to their rental unit if they have paid rent for the month when they show up to the shelter. Exceptions are made for people fleeing abusive situations.
They [the holes] were at the top of the wall and I started to think they were creepy so I plugged them up with plastic bags and I left the house for a while and when I came back all the bags were pulled out of the holes. So somebody had been in my room and seen it or they had known those holes were plugged before I left.

Tracy talked about feeling nervous and unsafe in her rented room, but also unable to leave. Eventually she decided it was better to sleep outside until she could get a shelter bed than to stay where she was being watched. Tracy’s comments illustrate the problems that many people living in poverty have finding permanent safe housing. In the search to find adequate housing, the women moved often. These frequent moves had a huge toll on them in terms of their stability, their chances of developing community relationships and their ability to move beyond trying to secure the basic necessities. She wanted people to know:

That affordable, safe housing does not exist in this city. It’s probably every city, but I’ve just witnessed it in this city. You look in the paper and you think oh that’s a decent price I can probably swing that and you go and it’s complete garbage. It’s not livable....You know what? It’s not so much that we need to get into subsided housing; the rent allowance is too low. It should be higher on the OW and the ODSP.... Because even ODSP what do you get? Something like 425 and you can’t get an apartment on 425 so you use up the money that is supposed to get you your transportation and your food you’re using that up to live it’s not enough to live so you’re pretty much locked into that little space that you’re living in. (Tracy, 51, came to the shelter after her divorce and subsequent relationship breakup).

Tracy is explaining a normal practice for people receiving government assistance as their main source of income. Often people are unable to find housing that is affordable on the meager rental allowances so they will plan to use their basic needs portion of their OW cheque to supplement the rental portion. This starts a cycle whereby the person is not able to buy food, pay for transportation, or have money for any emergencies. When I
asked respondents what needed to change so that more people were able to thrive through experiences that mirrored their own, Donaghy replied,

I would like to tell them [politicians and policymakers] that there needs to be more mental health and addictions facilities spread around the province, actually the whole country. Ottawa has more treatment facilities than the rest of Ontario probably. Keep our capital clean. We don’t want our problems on the streets. It’s just ridiculous. Huge long term programs and stuff like that but why are they all there? Between Milton and no, let’s say between Oakville and Niagara there is one women’s treatment facility with 12 beds but look at the number of women it is meant to serve. It is just ridiculous because that area is huge. Maybe they feel like they are beating their heads against the wall and stuff like that because so few people make it but you know what, for every one that does, it’s all worthwhile. It’s the one person that’s not dependent on the system anymore. It’s one person who has become a productive member of society. And even the ones who only make it short term are a positive thing.

The relationship between mental health, addictions and homelessness is nebulous in terms of cause and effect, but it is clear that there are many people suffering from mental health issues (anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, bi-polar, etc.) in this particular population. Sometimes people have been misdiagnosed (or never diagnosed) and self-medicate with street drugs or alcohol, which can lead to addictions. If a person decides she wants help for mental health issues or addictions, she must go through the long process of getting a referral and then wait for long periods of time for services to be available. The number of people wishing to access these services compared to the number of people who are able to access them shows that there need to be more services available for supportive housing and treatment centers for those people with mental health issues and/or addictions. Donaghy also stated that there were a number of facilities that exist near the nation’s capital, leaving her to believe that the presence of the facilities is less about helping those people who need them and more about hiding the people with problems
away from the rest of the world. The way that Donaghy framed this statement speaks to
the way that she feels she is being swept under the rug but not helped in any real way.

Tabitha talked about how she did not fit nicely into the categories that many
shelters had for taking in clients. When she had to fight to be admitted to different
shelters that she did not easily fit the criteria for, she felt even more alienated. She had
recommendations for all shelters being inclusive:

Shelters across the board? I think they all need to be more open and into variation. The shelter will take anybody pretty much as far as I know but in other cities there aren’t places like the shelter so it’s just for domestic violence. But if you have… that’s not domestic violence. What about people that have to testify or women out there that left a partner but can’t go to a shelter? There should be more variations out there for the people that need to have a safe place to live….If there is only going to be one shelter then it needs to be for everybody. It doesn’t matter your race, your colour, why you’re homeless: you’re homeless. So you need somewhere to stay. There should not be one shelter in the city, I know the funding is hard, but I mean there is certainly ways. They’ve got the casino, and at the end of the day there’s… the government, I pay enough taxes out of my paycheck. I would love to see politicians make sure that every single person has a place for not just domestic violence but for homeless. Even if it’s you can only stay here for two weeks because it’s such a small place and they help them get somewhere. They make sure that there is somewhere for them to go. It needs more funding….It needs more funding and it needs more open spectrum that not just one type can get in. Not just if you’re an addict, like the shelter’s there, it’s affected me. I don’t know. It should be women and children, no men come in because a lot of the women they’re dealing with, they come downstairs, they go on the computer, they get their medication and they’re seeing men. That’s not right, they’re not safe and that’s not fair.

Tabitha has touched on a number of important issues that she thinks need to be addressed
in order to properly serve the homeless population. Her comments about needing to have
a space that is for women only speaks to the trauma that her family has suffered at the
hands of men and her daughters’ continued fear of violence. She believed that in order to
make them truly feel safe, men should not be welcome in the shelter. She touches on the
importance of inclusive shelters. Often shelters access funding by having a specific mandate (to help women in abusive relationships, to house young pregnant women etc.). Tabitha sees this as a problematic practice because it alienates some people who need the services. The women were able to point out things that they found problematic with the services available to them and offered their suggestions. Overall, the women wanted to be treated well and they wanted to have more services available to them in the form of addiction services, shelter space, funding and respect. The women also make a strong case for having services that are more integrated and seamless so that they are able to really offer a chance for change for the women.

**Policy Recommendations**

In the first half of this chapter, the women have made suggestions about the problems they encountered and how to remedy them, in the rest of the chapter I will outline my policy recommendations. The experiences of homeless and precariously housed women suggest several remedies: working toward a living wage, funding affordable housing, increasing funding for shelters, raising social assistance rates, expanding treatment facilities and eliminating the discourse of family as refuge from policy prescriptions.

Full time work in Canada still leaves large numbers of people living below the poverty line. It is impossible to eradicate poverty when so many people are working full time and still not meeting the poverty line (or low income cut off lines) in this country. Minimum wages must be increased to meet the income level a person needs in order to survive and pay for necessities such as rent and food. Recent developments in Ontario that show support for a living wage but there are still major problems with the minimum
wage in the interim. Minimum wage has been increased from the amount of $6.85 (it stayed stable there for over ten years) to $7.15 (in February 2004) to $7.45 (in February 2005) to $7.75 (in February 2006) and $8.00 at present (Ontario Ministry of Labour 2007). At this rate, a single person can expect to make $16,640⁶⁰ before tax deductions a year if he/she is working a 40 hour work-week. Team that with the precarious nature of minimum wage jobs that often do not offer 40 hours a week consistently, and the take home rate is significantly reduced. It is nearly impossible to maintain a household, or even a room, on minimum wage. There are groups⁶¹ that are advocating for a minimum wage of $10 an hour and that is a good starting place to allow people to have a fighting chance at scraping by. By increasing the minimum wage to $10 an hour, a single person would earn approximately the same amount as the low income cut off if he/she worked a 40 hour work-week all year.

In the last 15 years, the minimum wage has increased $1.15 but in real terms, in terms of purchasing power, the wage has decreased approximately 20% over the last 30 years (CUPE 2007). This decrease in real value of minimum wages comes at the same time that rent has increased, gas prices have risen dramatically and in general, the cost of living is higher. The issue of low minimum wage is not spread out evenly over the population; there are approximately 2.4 million Canadians working for less than $10 an hour, the majority of those people are women and immigrants (CUPE 2007).

Many conservatives and businesses oppose the idea of a ten-dollar minimum wage

⁶⁰ In 2005, the Low Income Cut Off was $17,895 for an individual living in a mid sized city (http://www.amillionreasons.ca/Thirty_Years_of_the_Minimum_Wage.pdf)
because they believe it will cause the economy distress due to a loss of jobs and a loss of overall productivity (Ontario Chamber of Commerce 2007, Toronto Star 2007). It is unlikely that this drain would occur. In fact, the increase may even result in less money spent on social transfers due to a higher earned income. Many leading economists have stated that an increase in the minimum wage rate "can significantly improve the lives of low-income workers and their families, without the adverse effects that critics have claimed" (CUPE 2007). The lives of minimum wage workers would improve based on their access to more income but it is unlikely that mass layoffs or economic decline would occur.

The Ontario government has made a promise to increase the minimum wage to $10.25 by the year 2010. This is a good starting place, but needs to occur more quickly in order to alleviate poverty problems before 2010 (http://www.amillionreasons.ca/). Linked to the problem of minimum wages is the issue of low social transfers for people receiving OW or ODSP. The very low rates force people to take any job available regardless of the poor pay. This desperation does not translate into a fully employed, housed and vibrant population. Instead, it forces people to take whatever patchwork positions they can get.

The rates of social assistance in Ontario were slashed in 1995 by 22% by the Conservative government of Mike Harris (Torjman 2006). The Liberal McGuinty government recently raised the rates by 3% but that does not begin to mitigate the shortfalls from the 1995 cuts (OCAP 2007). It is necessary to raise the benefit levels to at least the low income cut off line in order to give the people receiving assistance a chance to survive. Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) is advocating a 40% increase in social assistance benefits in order to raise the assistance rates to a level that recipients can survive with (OCAP 2007). While much has been done for individual recipients from the
special diet clinics\textsuperscript{62}, the overall increase in OW and ODSP benefit rates is necessary to make improvements in the lives of all recipients. As outlined in chapter three, the low rates of benefits are a barrier to finding decent housing or to eating well. People who receive government benefits as their main source of income fall far below the low income cut off lines all across Ontario.

There are necessary changes that need to be made so that OW is targeting the needs of people who receive it. In order for the policy to be effective as a safety net and for it to be possible for recipients to move beyond receiving the benefits, changes must occur. These changes include higher amounts of social assistance benefits (including adding transportation cost so that people are able to get to appointments and job searches) and a higher shelter allowance rate. As a policy, it is irresponsible to offer the same benefits to people regardless of cost of living or needs as this forces people to be more reliant on other band-aid solutions.

In addition to changing the rates of benefits, the way that benefits are paid out should be changed. It is troublesome that social transfers come in the name of one household member. The assumption that the family should receive money together and that the person in whose name the benefits arrive is the person who has the entire family unit’s best interests at heart is naïve. In the case of abusive relationships, the control that one partner has over the other one with the control of the finances cannot be underestimated. Also, if a person with an active addiction gets the benefits paid out in full

\textsuperscript{62} Clinics have been set up (especially in Toronto) where people receiving assistance can access doctors willing to write them the required forms to access the special diet portion of OW. The rationale behind this campaign is that anyone on assistance should be eligible for this allowance because it is impossible to eat a healthy diet on the benefit amounts.
to them, he/she is unlikely to be able to resist spending the family money on his/her addiction. It is important that the benefits paid out are equally allotted so that each person had some autonomy over the way that their money is spent. This would allow relatively powerless people more power to make decisions and more mobility. McKeen (2004) explores the implications of family based policies and the importance of autonomy for women in terms of their ability to have ‘money in their own name’. In the mid-80s feminist work that was striving to have autonomous households for women gave way to another issue of eradicating childhood poverty (McKeen 2004). While child poverty is an important issue, it can only be addressed through the poverty of those caring for them, which indicates that a shift back to focusing on benefits in women’s names is timely. O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver (1999) also discuss the importance of moving beyond a male breadwinner, female caregiver model as a place for starting policies as that model is not the exclusive family make-up in the general population.

More affordable housing is the most important part of alleviating homelessness. The issue of homelessness is an issue that at its heart is due to a lack of affordable housing. In Ontario, 25% of people are spending more than half of their income on rent (Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association 2007). At one time it was possible to spend a greater portion of income on rent, but all other costs have increased, leaving very little to live on when rental fees use up the bulk. It is important that new rental properties are built before vacancy rates drop to the point that units are critical. Also, it is important to have some geared-to-income and subsidized housing available to people so that they can survive on low wages. For example, while St. Catharines is one of four cities across Ontario to have had increases to the rental vacancy rates since 2001, these rental units
have not been affordable and have not translated into fewer people struggling for housing (Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association 2007). This city still falls below the rate that is considered healthy vacancy rates. The Where’s Home? report indicates that the increase in vacant units may not be a reflection of suitable available apartments, but indicative of run down, unsuitable rental units (Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association 2007).

Housing is an issue that the Ontario government has started to take seriously, including allotting $127 million to DOOR (Delivering Opportunities for Ontario Renters), of which over $4 million went to the Niagara Region (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing 2007). There is an increase in social and assisted housing being built and created in Ontario, which presents huge possibilities for people living on the margins. This momentum must continue in order to challenge homelessness and poverty, as there are extensive waiting lists for these units.

When one’s income and rental costs are not compatible, or when there are life crises such as addiction, abuse, eviction and so on, people may need to rely on the shelter system for aid. Many of the interviewees spoke of more inclusive shelters and an increase in funding to operate more shelter beds. These are both necessary to serve as many women as possible. In addition, the policies around the Hostel Agreement (through OW discussed in chapter three) must be revised. At present, the Hostel Agreement allows a person to stay in a shelter for up to 30 days in a 365-day period (Ceckin 2007). There are exceptions to this rule, but the exceptions are just that – exceptions - so there are no guarantees and the request process takes valuable time that shelter workers could better

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63 Many shelters operate with funding targeting specific groups of people such as people fleeing abuse. The interviewees suggested that the shelters be open to everyone in order to meet all people’s needs.
spend helping the clients access other services. There are some people who are not able to secure housing in such short periods of time or who are in need of more support before they attempt to find housing. Many women coming to the shelter to get sober start a three-week day treatment program that is emotionally exhausting and leaves them only the evenings to look for housing. Because of the low housing allowance through OW, they are often only able to afford rooms in the area of town where many of their drug dealers are present at night. The temptation is often too great to resist.

In addition to more dollars being spent on the amount of time women can stay at the shelter, more money should go into shelter operating costs. With additional funds, more staff (and more highly trained staff) could work, which would help to alleviate the problems of staff burnout and the feeling that many of the interviewees had that they were somehow a burden because the staff were too busy. Many of the women come back to the shelter (as evidenced by the women willing to participate in this study) and they also need continued support and access to services. In order to give the women attention when they are not occupying one of the shelter beds, there needs to be an increase in shelter funding to hire the appropriate staff.

Many of the respondents indicated that they had tried to access services to deal with their addictions. While most of the women were able to go to a three-week day treatment in town, at best they were given long waiting lists for long-term treatment centers. As a shelter employee, I have heard many women state that they were going to die while waiting to get into treatment. These women were not being dramatic; they truly believed that they would not be able to resist the powerful urges to return to the drugs or alcohol that they were addicted to.
In short, there needs to be an investment in the poorest people in our province so that real changes can be made to alleviate poverty and homelessness. The ways in which the provincial government can attempt to close the gap between the poorest citizens and the rich are to increase the minimum wage and to increase social assistance benefits. The municipal government can help to close that gap as well by making affordable housing a priority and making solutions for long-term poverty an important consideration. An increase in social housing and adequate, affordable rental spaces will go a long way in alleviating homelessness. If there were more mental health programs and addiction treatment facilities, people could access help in a timely manner and make major life changes. Changing the way that benefits are paid out in order to protect the most vulnerable people in families would also go a long way in helping the women whom I interviewed. The women’s stories prompted me to see these as necessary policy changes; they want to be seen as human, and to have the empathy of those around them, so that other people do not have to have the same life experiences.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“All change is not growth, as all movement is not forward.” Ellen Glasgow
Conclusion

In this project, I examined the ways in which women who had been homeless understood their personal networks as helpful or problematic to moving out of homelessness and in dealing with life crises. I wanted to explore the ways that public policy and personal relationships worked together to alleviate poverty and homelessness. This is timely research as public opinion shifts about charity and the expectation that people rely on their own networks for aid gains popularity. In an economic climate characterized by precarious jobs and less inclusive benefits, I wanted to examine what impact those events had on the way homeless women live their lives.

I anticipated that the women would talk about the difficulties they had relying on families and friends when they were dealing with the problems associated with poverty and homelessness. I did not anticipate hearing the myriad ways that these difficulties manifested themselves and that those troubles would extend so fully into the social service and not for profit fields. I thought that the women would talk about their strong networks but point to the ways that those networks were not viable ways to deal with poverty. I found a group of women who needed to access a crisis shelter because of addictions, health problems, and abuse. They were not able to rely on their families in the ways that they would have liked to and they also could not rely on their friends. Many of the women were hard pressed to think of people with whom they were always in touch. The women also talked about not being able to find the appropriate social services, either because they were full or because they simply did not exist. Some of the women relocated to other cities in order to access detoxification services. Other women discussed the long wait times they had in order to be eligible for services (like counseling, treatment centers, subsidized housing, job training, ODSP, etc.).
Instead of noting the importance of the shelter as a place where new connections were made, the women spoke of that experience as a most isolating time in their lives, with the exception of those women who felt connected to shelter staff. Most of the respondents remembered their time in the shelter as a time that they kept to themselves. They did not see any parallels between their lived experience and those of the other guests in the shelter. In addition to feeling isolated because they othered themselves, they stated they felt like they were a burden at times because the shelter staff were always so busy. Many of the women talked about how preoccupied and frazzled front line service providers were and sometimes decided not to ask for help because they did not want to further complicate the workday of the staff members. The reluctance to approach staff at the shelter meant that some women did not get the referrals that they sorely needed and did not benefit fully from the time they spent in the shelter.

There are a number of issues that intersect in the lives of these women to make their plight more difficult. Very few people disclosed that they came to the shelter for just one reason, rather, it was the culmination of a variety of things such as low wages or insufficient social assistance, domestic breakdown, unsuitable housing conditions, addiction, and so on. The ways that these circumstances intersect shows that reliance on personal networks as a form of policy is misguided. The way that personal networks develop when a person is addicted to a substance is very different from when she is not—therefore an addicted person is usually less able to rely on her kin for support due to the shared history of betrayal, lack of trust and fear. Women fleeing abuse are often cut off from their friends and family early into the abusive relationship and may find it extremely difficult to call on those relationships in times of crisis.
The parallel issues of neo-liberal policies, increased reliance on individual rather than collective solutions to problems, and the resurgence of the deserving versus undeserving poor rhetoric have made Ontario (and specifically the Niagara region) a punitive place for poor and homeless women. Increases in precarious employment, and decreases in non-profit agencies and social assistance benefits work to further alienate people. While it is possible for some people to rely on their social networks for help when they face crisis, my research shows that some of the most marginalized and needy women simply cannot call on their relationships as a solution to poverty or homelessness.

The stories these women shared indicate that the services available for our most vulnerable citizens are not adequate and as a matter of equality and social justice, those public policies and services need to be examined and re-ordered to meet the needs of those people who attempt to access them. In short, there must be: changes made to the stereotypical notions people hold about poverty, increases in the minimum wage, increases in the benefit rates of OW and ODSP, and more services for mental health and addictions.

**Limitations**

It is important to note the limitations to the research in order to understand the potential value. There were three main limitations to this research: the participants, my dual role as a researcher/shelter staff, and the interview questions.

The participants limited the research in that there were only eleven people interviewed and they self-selected to participate as women who continued to use the shelter. Although my aim was not to be representative of all women who had ever been homeless, the sampling method has affected the group of people who were interviewed.
The only people involved were women who had continued interactions with the shelter and presumably, had overall positive experiences while in the shelter. I did not interview any women from other shelters in the area or make any attempt to find women who were not still in contact with shelter workers. In addition, there are many women with addiction issues who use this particular shelter. The participants were asked to self-reflect in the interviews about the ways they were able (or not able) to rely on their friends and family. As stated earlier, addiction is a problem that affects everyone in an addict’s social circle and often those people have to give up trying to be supportive. The nature of the interviews limits the analysis to using the way that they remember their interactions as truth. There is not a lot of room for me to discuss the ways in which those networks were useful to them prior to coming to the shelter.

My dual role as a researcher and as a shelter employee also caused limitations. My dual role affected the people who participated in the research – likely some women who would not usually participate in such an endeavor did so because I was the one who was conducting the research. Furthermore, possibly women who would typically be involved in the project decided not to pursue it because of personal feelings about me. While my insider position as an advocate allowed me to understand statements and observe the women’s interactions in a way that an outsider could not, it also made it difficult for me to ask some questions. I was unable to ask questions that were obvious to the participants the way that an outsider would have. I also missed opportunities to talk about some of the strategies women employed to deal with low wages and precarious housing because many of the stories the women shared with me were stories I had
already heard and therefore I did not follow them up with more questions the way I 
would have if I did not have intimate knowledge of their lives.

The last major limitation to my research design were the problems I encountered 
with my research questions. In an effort to have similar data from all participants I 
followed the interview guide too closely and asked questions that were unnecessary. In 
retrospect, more questions about the participants' families, their economic standing and 
more in depth questioning about their history of reliance on kin and friends would have 
been useful for my analysis.

**Future Research**

This project has offered a number of potential future research projects to explore. 
Specifically, the area and participants who were studied could be expanded, the group of 
women could be increased and longitudinal research could be employed. This study 
focused exclusively on the Niagara region and specifically on women who had stayed in 
one shelter. To explore better the trends in the way precariously housed or poor women 
are able to rely on their networks, it would be useful to fill out the geographic area that is 
researched. Future research could include a more exhaustive Ontario study where rural 
and urban areas are explored. It would also be useful to compare the provinces. In a study 
that compared the provinces, it would be possible to make more conclusions about the 
place policy takes in mediating poverty and homelessness for women.

This research only deals with the sub-group of homeless women who had been at 
a specific shelter. It would be useful to interview other women to determine if they had 
similar experiences. Young women in youth shelters or families fleeing abuse may have 
very different experiences than the women I interviewed.
A longitudinal approach would allow the opportunity to know more about the ways in which family and friends are a support. It would allow for interviewing while in a shelter, while housed and in between. My experience with the women who were interviewed is that they often return to the shelter but in the interview, they lumped all of those experiences together. By having a number of interviews over a longer period of time, it would be helpful to truly explore how these women actually rely on friends and family instead of only how they recall that experience. This would enable me to correlate my findings with shifting public policy. With this research, I could comment more extensively on the ways in which changes to social policy directly affects the women who are living in precarious housing situations. Thus future research that traces in a more explicit way the connection between women in a shelter and social policy could actually quite dramatically elaborate the effects of policies on one of the most marginalized groups, women with addictions.
Appendix A

Title of Study: Women’s Social Networks in Niagara.

Principal Investigator: Cheryl Athersych, MA Candidate, Department of Social Justice and Equity Studies, Brock University

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Kate Bezanson, Professor, Departments of Sociology and Social Justice and Equity Studies, Brock University

I, Cheryl Athersych, MA Candidate, from the Department of Social Justice and Equity Studies, Brock University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled Women’s Social Networks in Niagara.

The purpose of this research project is to explore how a woman’s relationships with friends, family and service providers are used when she experiences times of crisis. I would like to learn more about what gaps there are in relying on friends, family and available services so that recommendations can be made to policy makers. The study involves a one on one interview with the principle researcher about these topics. The expected duration of the interview will be approximately two hours.

This research should benefit women who find themselves in crisis, emotionally, financially or in terms of their housing if policy makers are swayed by this research. Women will be offered a $10 honorarium for participating.

Although the recruitment is taking place at the shelter in St. Catharines, they are not in any way affiliated with the research. Any information that is given in the research sessions will not be given to the shelter staff under any circumstances.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Officer (905 688-5550 ext 3035, reb@brocku.ca)

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you

Cheryl Athersych
MA Candidate
905 688 5550 ext.3767
Cheryl@athersych.ca

Dr. Kate Bezanson
Professor
905 688 5550 ext. 4902
kate.bezanson@brocku.ca

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University’s Research Ethics Board [05-281 AHERSYCH]
Appendix B
Informed Consent - Interview

Date: March 24, 2006
Project Title: Women’s Social Networks in Niagara

Principal Investigator:
Cheryl Athersych, MA candidate
Department of Social Justice and Equity Studies
Brock University
905 688 5550 x 3767

Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Kate Bezanson, Faculty Supervisor
Department of Sociology/ Social Justice and Equity Studies
Brock University
(905) 688-5550 Ext. 3450

INVITATION
You are invited to participate in a study that involves research about women’s social networks in the Niagara region. The purpose of this study is to understand the roles that women’s relationships with friends, family and service providers help (or fail them) in times of crisis – financial, emotional or otherwise. This research will be useful in determining the gaps in resources in order to make policy recommendations.

WHAT’S INVOLVED
As a participant, you will be asked to meet with the researcher for a one-on-one interview to discuss your social networks and the ways that social connections have been relied on in the past (or ways that you would like to rely on them). Participation will take approximately two hours. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym and will be given the opportunity to ask to review the final transcript before the researcher does the analysis. The interview will be audio taped for transcription purposes. The audiotape will be destroyed once the transcription is complete.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS
Possible benefits of participation include the chance to let policy makers know about where there are gaps in social services in this area. There is the possibility that a person may feel discomfort about some of the areas discussed in the interview, but there will be resources available to participants that could be used to minimize those ill feelings.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study; however, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. Shortly after the interview has been completed, if you choose, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. Data collected during this study will be stored in a locked cabinet in an office at Brock University. All data will be stored with identifying markers taken off, using only a pseudonym. Data will be kept for an indefinite amount of time as the research may be used for further projects with your consent. Access to this data will be restricted to Cheryl Athersych and Dr. Kate Bezanson. It is important to mention that this research is in no way affiliated with the shelter and the information from the focus group will not be made available to the shelter employees.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.

PUBLICATION OF RESULTS
Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available if the participant chooses to be contacted.

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE
If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact the Principal Investigator or the Faculty Supervisor using the contact information provided above. This study has been
reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University # 05-281. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

CONSENT FORM
I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: ____________________________________

Signature: _________________________________ Date: ________________________________

I would like to be contacted to verify the accuracy of my transcript yes ______ no _________

Contact Information ________________________________________________________________

I give the researcher permission to use my interview information at a later date for another project.

Signature ________________________________________________________________
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