Surviving the housing crisis: Social violence and the production of evictions among women who use drugs in Vancouver, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Single room accommodation (SRA) housing is among the only forms of accessible housing to marginalized women who use illicit drugs in many urban settings. However, SRA housing environments may create specific health and drug risks for women. Little research has examined the gendered mechanisms contributing to housing vulnerability for women who use drugs and the subsequent ways they aim to mitigate harm. This study examines the gendered vulnerabilities to, and harms stemming from, evictions from SRAs in Vancouver, Canada. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 56 people who use drugs who were recently evicted (past 60 days) from SRAs in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood, 19 of whom identified as women which informed this analysis. Participants were recruited by Peer Researcher Assistants for baseline and follow-up interviews three to six months later. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically and interpreted by drawing on concepts of social violence. Findings underscore how gendered violence and forms of social control operationalized within SRAs normalized violence against women and restricted their agency. Surveillance mechanisms increased women's experiences of violence as they sought to evade such interventions. Post-eviction, women faced pronounced vulnerability to harm which reinforced their social and spatial marginality within a drug scene. Collectively, women's experiences within SRAs highlight how the hybrid forms of disciplinary mechanisms used within these housing environments significantly impacted women's experiences of harm. Greater attention to the impacts of housing and building policies on women who use drugs is needed to better address the morbidity and mortality of this population.

1. Introduction

Housing has long been recognized as a critical structural determinant of health that significantly shapes health outcomes among marginalized people who use illicit drugs (Aidala et al., 2005; Milloy et al., 2012). People who use drugs (PWUD) are disproportionately represented among those who are unstably housed (Briggs et al., 2009), which can foster high-risk drug use practices, including syringe sharing (Aidala et al., 2005; Kennedy et al., 2017). Specifically, housing instability has been shown to increase risk of blood-borne infections, adverse mental health outcomes, and substance use patterns (Knight et al., 2014; Rhodes et al., 2006). Residential evictions can further impact mental and physical health outcomes in ways distinguishable from housing instability (Cooper et al., 2012; Kennedy et al., 2017). Given these effects, it is imperative to better understand the ways in which PWUD experience housing instability, and the social-structural and spatial inequities that produce housing vulnerability and evictions for this population.

Urban housing environments and the mechanisms that produce housing precarity are intrinsically gendered, while simultaneously racialized and classed (Beebeejaun, 2017; Logan and Stults, 2011). These intersecting dynamics disproportionately impact low-income women by structuring how housing can be accessed, producing unique gendered and racialized barriers to securing stable housing (Callaghan et al., 2002). Social-structural inequities, such as poverty (Williams, 2011) and gendered violence (Daoud et al., 2016), increase women's

experiences of 'invisible homelessness' (e.g. couch surfing, risk of homelessness) (Novac, 2001), and disproportionately affect racialized women. This often results in gendered health outcomes, with women at higher risk of experiencing violence (Marshall et al., 2008; Shannon et al., 2009), negative mental health outcomes (Evans, 2003; Knight et al., 2014), and more difficulty in negotiating risk-reduction strategies (Lazarus et al., 2011; Shannon et al., 2008a).

Single room accommodation (SRA) housing remains one of the only forms of low-income urban housing accessible to women who use drugs (WWUD) in many settings (Knight, 2015; Robertson, 2007). SRAs were historically built for men working in seasonal industries, and were designed as a temporary form of housing (Sommers and Blomley, 2002). However, housing policies in many urban centers, particularly those marked by gentrification, have favored SRAs as a source of 'affordable housing' for homeless or unstably housed populations despite research underscoring the association of these housing environments with higher rates of HIV infection, injection drug use, and violence (Evans and Strathdee, 2006; Shannon et al., 2006). Additionally, research has demonstrated how the organization of SRA housing environments produces gendered vulnerability to health and drug-related harms for WWUD, and can increase risk-taking practices among women (Knight et al., 2014; Lazarus et al., 2011). However, there remains an incomplete understanding of how gendered dynamics within SRA environments can produce housing precarity among WWUD and how these subsequently impact women's drug use, exposure to violence, and overall social and spatial vulnerability. Such understandings are critical to enhancing equity and inclusion within housing responses.

While research has illustrated how particular forms of low-income housing regulate marginalized populations (Boyd et al., 2016), less attention has been paid to their role in reinforcing 'everyday' (Scheper-Hughes, 1996) and symbolic (Bourdieu, 2001; Epele, 2002) forms of social violence prevalent in drug scenes. Everyday violence draws attention to forms of violence (e.g. sexual and physical assault) that are systematically normalized and obscured given its pervasiveness (Scheper-Hughes, 1996), such as gendered interpersonal violence within drug scenes (Bourgois et al., 2004; McNeil et al., 2014). Symbolic violence refers to the processes through which individuals who are socially dominated come to embody their social-structural oppression as 'natural,' blaming themselves for their inequities (Bourdieu, 2001; Epele, 2002). These relational forms of social violence are further impacted by structural violence, in which institutionalized inequities, including racism, poverty, and economic inequality, reinforce the social and spatial marginalization of WWUD (Bungay et al., 2010; DeVerteuil, 2015; Farmer, 1997; Shannon et al., 2008a). Within this, social violence manifests in gendered and racialized ways (Crenshaw, 1991; Razack, 2002), including gender power relations that reinforce symbolic violence by emphasizing women's silent subordination through men-centered ideologies (Bourgois et al., 2004; Epele, 2002).

Housing and the notion of 'home' are often conceptualized through hegemonic expectations (Robertson, 2007), which give rise not only to gender power dynamics, but technologies of social control and surveillance that regulate women whose behaviours 'disrupt' gendered assumptions (Gillion, 2001; Glasbeek and van der Meulen, 2014). Examining these technologies implemented within SRAs as mechanisms used to exert power over and govern (Foucault, 1977) – in this case, WWUD – is important as such mechanisms regulate bodies and space. However, surveillance mechanisms are not applied equally, with marginalized individuals less able to protect themselves from surveillance structures (Boyd et al., 2016; Gillion, 2001; Glasbeek and van der Meulen, 2014). As such, WWUD are particularly impacted by surveillance in complex ways given the extensive histories of the observation and policing of femininity by men (Glasbeek and van der Meulen, 2014). There is thus a need to understand how technologies of social control enacted within SRAs can reinforce residential instability for

WWUD. Examining how eviction-related and SRA housing dynamics reinforce violence against WWUD can be useful as it deconstructs understandings of 'irrational' behaviours by placing women's actions within the broader context of survival. Further, acknowledging the structural contexts shaping housing precarity for WWUD can provide a more robust understanding of the violence of evictions. While research has examined how the organization of SRAs can have differential impacts on women (Knight et al., 2014; Lazarus et al., 2011), little is known about the ways in which gendered forms of social control and violence against WWUD is experienced within the context of evictions from SRAs. Understanding the pervasiveness of violence within these settings is critical to highlighting the social-structural inequities faced by WWUD and can better inform efforts to address their morbidity and mortality.

Greater attention to the mechanisms contributing to harms resulting from housing vulnerability amongst WWUD is urgently needed in Vancouver, Canada. Similar to other major cities, Vancouver is experiencing a housing crisis stemming from international capital flows, gentrification, and gaps in housing policy (Burnett, 2014; Lee, 2016). Such factors have resulted in increased pressures among local government to rapidly redevelop neighbourhoods to meet the growing demand for housing. This has been increasingly problematic in the Downtown Eastside (DTES), one of few neighbourhoods with affordable housing in Vancouver, and the nexus of gentrification, substance use, and homelessness. Of the city's SRAs, 94% are located in the DTES (City of Vancouver, 2017). While the dearth of affordable housing in Vancouver has also led to the renovation and addition of SRA housing stock to accommodate the increasing homeless population (BC Housing, 2017), the affordability of such housing has been undermined by pressures to gentrify, leading to residential displacements (Sutherland et al., 2013).

SRA housing in Vancouver includes privately-owned (55%) and non-market (45%) buildings with varying conditions (e.g. recently renovated, dilapidated) (City of Vancouver, 2017). Privately-owned SRAs average 100 square feet with substandard conditions (e.g. health and safety violations, infestations), shared washrooms, and assorted building policies (e.g. guest fees) (City of Vancouver, 2017). Within these buildings, monthly rent levels regularly exceed the $375 monthly shelter allowance allotted for tenants on social assistance, with rents averaging $548 (Wallstam et al., 2016). Non-market SRAs include government- and non-profit-owned buildings, which provide stable rent levels and some tenant supports (e.g. support workers, meals) (City of Vancouver, 2017).

Given the socio-historical contexts of such housing environments, as well as the concentration of SRAs in the DTES, SRAs continue to be shaped by gender power relations that can perpetuate violence towards women. This paper explores the gendered mechanisms and contexts that generate and reproduce vulnerability to residential evictions from private and non-profit-operated SRAs in Vancouver among WWUD (transgender-inclusive). In doing so, we emphasize the role of social and structural violence within the context of women's lived experiences in an urban drug scene, and the subsequent harms produced by residential evictions.

2. Methods

We draw upon semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted as part of a community-based participatory research project exploring social-structural factors that produce evictions among marginalized PWUD, and their subsequent health and social outcomes. The larger project involved 100 longitudinal interviews with 56 recently evicted (past 60 days) PWUD who lived in the DTES. Women and Indigenous persons were oversampled to facilitate analyses of their unique experiences following eviction. Participants were recruited by trained Peer Research Assistants (PRAs) and were interviewed at baseline and three to six months later. This analysis was informed by baseline and