

# Survival and Resistance: A Zine Study with Young Women and Femmes Experiencing Housing Injustice in Canadian Cities

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Article abstract

Housing injustice is a serious public health issue among young women and femmes (aged 18-24) in Canada but the research available on this topic seldom centres the voices of people with lived and living experience. This population is marginally visible in the shelter systems; instead their experiences may be described as “hidden homelessness”. This housing typology refers to situations where someone seeks shelter in ways like couch-surfing, car sleeping, or other short-term accommodations that are not typically recognized as responding to housing injustice. Drawing from a methodology of social constructionism, this paper reviews findings from an arts-based inquiry that sought to answer the research question, “what are the survival and resistance strategies that young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice use to support their wellness and engage with life?” Using reflexive thematic analysis, a zine was created and analyzed to reveal five themes: 1). Affective and Psychological Strategies of Resistance; 2). Survival Strategies and Behaviours to Ensure Material Survival; 3). Felt Knowledge About Good Living; 4). Organized Abandonment and Other Normed Chaos; and, 5). Importance of Human Connection, Solidarity, and Radical Care. The strengths and limitations, along with implications for public health policy and research are discussed.



## **Survival and Resistance: A Zine Study with Young Women and Femmes Experiencing Housing Injustice in Canadian Cities**

**Nicole Santos Dunn and Jeffrey Ansloos**

**ABSTRACT** Housing injustice is a serious public health issue among young women and femmes (aged 18-24) in Canada but the research available on this topic seldom centres the voices of people with lived and living experience. This population is marginally visible in the shelter systems; instead their experiences may be described as “hidden homelessness”. This housing typology refers to situations where someone seeks shelter in ways like couch-surfing, car sleeping, or other short-term accommodations that are not typically recognized as responding to housing injustice. Drawing from a methodology of social constructionism, this paper reviews findings from an arts-based inquiry that sought to answer the research question, “what are the survival and resistance strategies that young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice use to support their wellness and engage with life?” Using reflexive thematic analysis, a zine was created and analyzed to reveal five themes: 1). Affective and Psychological Strategies of Resistance; 2). Survival Strategies and Behaviours to Ensure Material Survival; 3). Felt Knowledge About Good Living; 4). Organized Abandonment and Other Normed Chaos; and, 5). Importance of Human Connection, Solidarity, and Radical Care. The strengths and limitations, along with implications for public health policy and research are discussed.

**KEYWORDS** housing injustice, women and femmes, resistance, public health, policy, arts-based research

Young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice are marginally visible in the shelter systems. In this study “women and femmes” refers to people whose gender identity expresses femininity and acknowledges a range of gender expressions. Expressions of femininity are subject to misogyny and transmisogyny—particularly in male-dominated public spaces like shelters and the streets. This discrimination can fuel “hidden homelessness” and this typology refers to instances of couch surfing with friends, staying with family, living in a vehicle, or exchanging services for shelter (Schwan et al., 2020). Since hidden homelessness is often rendered invisible through the eyes of public health, it is very difficult to get an accurate sense of the experience. At present, the unique needs of this population are not well described in the academic literature and attempts at elucidating these needs must ethically respond to concerns of safety, power differentials, and exploitation (Couch et al., 2012).

## Literature Review

### *Youth Housing Injustice*

Youth homelessness refers to the situation of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe, or consistent residence (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016, p. 1). However, who is considered a youth depends on how “youth” is conceptualized. While ages 13–24 here are considered part of youthhood, the United Nations (n.d.) recognizes youthhood as occurring between the ages of 15 and 24. According to Statistics Canada (2021), youthhood is the period between ages 15 and 29, while the Youth Criminal Justice Act defines youthhood as occurring between ages 12 and 17 (Department of Justice, 2021). There is variation in how youthhood is conceptualized and legalized. Yang and Tuck (2014) ask us to consider if youthhood is a developmental period or a structural framing. As a developmental framing, youthhood is measured against proximity to adulthood and so questions of self-determination become important. However, as a structural framing, “youth” becomes a category around which institutions are built with material implications for those experiencing homelessness (Yang & Tuck, 2014). Regardless of its definition, youth homelessness is a human rights violation.

Young people seek support differently than their adult counterparts experiencing homelessness, and often avoid services that may put them in contact with authorities for fear of penalization (Gaetz et al., 2016). Hidden homelessness prevents youth from experiencing the necessary nurturing attachments that facilitate safety and personal development. To date it is very difficult to get an accurate sense of the proportion of women and femmes who experience this issue, and it is estimated that homelessness among women is three and a half times greater than what we presently know (Klassen & Spring, 2015).

### *Resistance*

Identifying resistance requires asking questions about what is being responded to, including feelings, individuals, ideologies, and structures (Yang & Tuck, 2014). Wade (1997) refers to resistance as “any mental or behavioural act through which a person attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression” (p. 25). This definition provides a useful baseline conceptualization of resistance but is considered vague in the context of this paper. To further understand resistance, the contextual dimensions of what is being resisted must be considered. Yang and Tuck (2014) point out that “theories of resistance cannot be generalized. Resistance is always in context, in a place, between real people—even when some of those people embody the state. Resistance is always in real time too, and what is possible in one time and context is unthinkable in another time and context” (p.8). The point is that resistance is a complicated concept because how it is understood is highly contingent on how it is framed. What may be true for one individual or community in a particular context must not be generalized to others.

**Resistance and psychotherapy.** In psychotherapy, finding counter-narratives of resistance can destabilize problem-saturated stories about oppression and support individuals to consider the ways they practiced survivance and agency, as, for example, in the case of children who refuse to cry in front of their abusers. While some might pathologize this experience as dissociation, an alternate understanding might consider and celebrate the child's decision to safeguard their emotions from unsafe people. It is therapeutic to highlight how an individual *responded* to violence, and not exclusively focus on how it *affected* them (Wade, 1997). Engaging with this framing considers what this resistance might say about the child, their hopes for themselves, and their life.

**Youth resistance.** Youth resistance runs the risk of being “made precious” through a focus on youth as a developmental category (Yang & Tuck, 2014, p. 4). Developmental categorization risks resistance behaviours being viewed as deviant or pathological instead of autonomous or wise. There may also be undeclared expectations about what resistance looks like, that it perhaps moves its actors towards “empowerment” (Yang & Tuck, 2014, p. 9). As Kelley and colleagues (2014) assert:

We cannot decide what resistance is, based on its perceived effectiveness. We have to understand where people are coming from—the limits, the cultures, the experiences, the histories, the memories—and see self-activity as self-active, self-generated modes of struggle. We don't have to like these self-activities. We don't have to think they're great or grand. We miss the point if we only judge them strictly on whether or not they succeed (p. 91).

Their point is important because it insists that resistance is not uni-directional but is instead entangled in particular living realities.

**Resistance and women.** Resistance occurring among women has also been theorized among radical feminist scholars. Burstow (1992) proposed that women's resistance to violence, particularly male violence, can be understood as existing on a continuum. On one side, resistance is seen as passive actions or behaviours that do not stop the violence or challenge the status quo. On the other side is collective action grounded in critical consciousness that seeks to destabilize patriarchal systems of oppression. Within housing injustice, women's resistance is a useful concept for interrogating stereotypes of disempowerment (Hellegers, 2011).

**What resistance is not.** It is important to disentangle what resistance is *not*. When it comes to the issues of structural violence, we can see that resistance has been “domesticated into forms of political and commercial participation” that do not necessarily advance or alleviate the conditions of precarity contributing to distress (Yang & Tuck, 2014, p. 8). These participatory initiatives center on raising awareness about various issues without abolishing the systems that

sustain harm (Dej, 2020). These initiatives are often observed within the non-profit industrial complex and, subsequently, the homelessness industrial complex.

## **Methodology and Methods**

### ***Social Constructionism***

Social constructionism is concerned with meaning making as it occurs through social interactions (Chen et al., 2011) and is in direct opposition to positivist ways of knowing. Social constructionism privileges knowledge that is typically taken for granted, such as insider knowledge and “tacit knowing” (Hoshmand, 2005) and is concerned with the ways that meaning making is connected to context (Chen et al., 2011, p.131). Pertinent to this study, various forms of exclusion and violence such as patriarchy, transphobia, misogyny, ableism, and classism must be named and interrogated. Importantly, social constructionism attends to language use. The words we choose hold power and where this power is located can change our understanding of the issue being investigated.

### ***Desire-Driven Research***

Too often research can totalize conditions of oppression with the identities of those the research seeks to understand. Tuck (2009) defines this damage-centered research as “research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation” (p. 413). All research is complicit in some level of harm and this study aims not only to mitigate harm but to “suspend damage”. Tuck argues for an epistemological shift in the framing of research with marginalized communities towards desire-centered research. Tuck states, “desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (p. 416). This kind of research “not only documents the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope” (Truck, 2009, p. 416). As such, a desire-based research approach is reflected in the choice to pursue an arts-based inquiry and to promote an experience that was hopeful, reflective, and, possibly fun.

### ***Arts-Based Research***

The choice to pursue arts-based research speaks to the observation that when it comes to complicated and emotional topics, words fail us (Jaworski & Scott, 2016). This method is also an ecologically validated approach to research with those who experience houselessness (Conrad & Kendall, 2009; Eastham et al., 2010; Sakamoto et al., 2008; Schwan et al., 2017; Walsh et al., 2009). In this study, young women and femmes were invited to respond to a series of strengths-based prompts using a creative art medium called “zines” (Art Gallery of Ontario, 2009). This method seeks to make visible experiences that are often made invisible within mainstream discourses (Estrella & Forinash, 2007; Finley, 2003; Prinsloo, 2010). Zines are not only for the purpose of data collection in this study; the completed zines hold valuable knowledge that reaches the community in an accessible and timely way, unlike research publications that have a slow turnaround time and a limited audience (Chavis et al., 1983).

## ***Zines***

Zines are independently produced, tiny publications, born from youth counterculture to document personal and often overlooked facets of living (Hays, 2017). They are made with easily accessible office materials (often folded printer paper bound to create a small folio), making them simple to produce. They are self-published, share “insider knowledge” (Epston & White, 1990) and archive ways of knowing. Zines can house almost everything, including poetry, short stories, essays, points of view, art, lists, opinions, drawings, recipes, rants, photographs, and more. If it can fit on the page, it can exist in a zine. Their very existence materializes voices located at margins, making them an appropriate vehicle for knowledge exploration and mobilization within this study (Hays, 2017).

## **Social Engagement and Data Collection**

Social engagement occurred through consultation with community agencies that served the population in question and took seriously the feedback provided. Over 75 organizations were contacted and 17 provided feedback about the methods and best approaches to ethical “data” collection. To support fairness, the authors agreed to collect the first thirteen pieces that were submitted to honour the time and care participants took to submit to the project. Participant submissions were compensated with \$50 delivered in whatever medium they preferred (e.g., e-transfers, cash, gift cards). The zine sought to return its knowledge to the community quickly and freely online without the barriers of access to academic databases. The zine itself belongs to its contributors and broader community.

## **Method of Analysis**

The zine submissions containing both language and imagery were digitized and uploaded to NVivo coding software for a comprehensive analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) emphasizing researcher reflexivity was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis involved six phases: 1. familiarization with each zine submission; 2. coding the data; 3. generating initial themes; 4. further reviewing and developing the themes to account for nuance; 5. refining, defining, and naming the themes while coming to a consensus on what findings are emerging; and, finally, 6. writing up the results (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Elements of close reading and visual discourse analysis within the RTA were also considered. While close reading is a literary criticism technique attending closely to what is said and how it is said (Harvard University, 2024), visual discourse analysis is concerned with the meaning of images including what they intend to represent and how audiences interpret them (Trau et al., 2019).

## **Research Team Positionality**

The first author of this study is an adult white settler of Portuguese and Irish ancestry. She is a psychotherapist and doctoral candidate in clinical and counselling psychology with a history of working in community settings with young people who have experienced violence. She lives in an urban context and has never been unhoused. The second author is a queer Cree and English, belonging to Fisher River Cree Nation. He is a psychologist and researcher working

in the area of social and environmental dimensions of Indigenous health justice, housing, and suicide prevention.

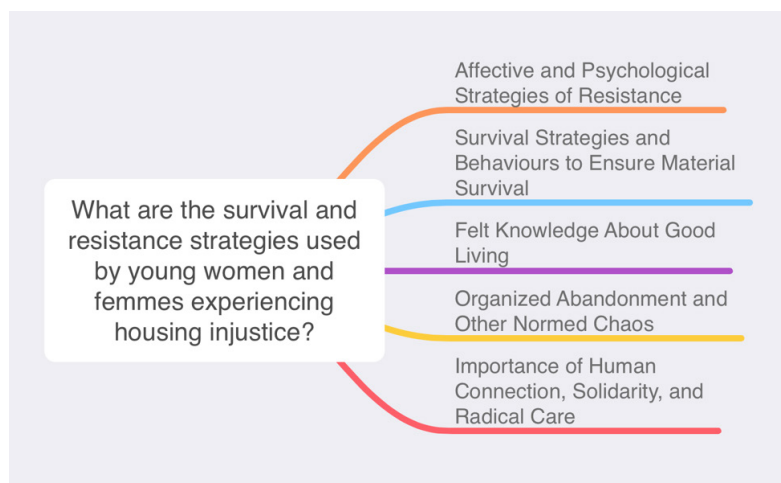
### Reflexivity

Reflexivity was engaged as a practice of critical decision making across every aspect of the study (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Four broad categories recommended by Walsh (2003) were used to organize this process: contextual, methodological, interpersonal, and personal. Contextually, we critically engaged with anti-capitalist principles, seeking to deeply reflect on exploitation in research, which resulted in compensation to improve the finances of participants. Methodologically, moves towards suspending damage (Tuck, 2009) were prioritized for hopeful and generative art that could be returned immediately to the community (Chavis et al., 1983). Interpersonally, this research sought accountability and transparency in power dynamics across agency contact, recruitment, and relationships with participants. Personally, we reflected in an iterative and ongoing process on how our own language could illuminate or disenfranchise the submissions, especially in considering how the language of deviance is often weaponized to conceal creative and useful practices of resistance.

### Results

The analysis of the zine generated five themes from the thirteen submissions: 1. Affective and psychological strategies of resistance; 2. Survival strategies and behaviours to ensure material survival; 3. Felt knowledge about good living; 4. Organized abandonment and other normed chaos; and, 5. Importance of human connection, solidarity, and radical care (see Figure 1). The themes reflect their relevance to the research questions and their salience across analysis.

*Figure 1.* Theme Tree



*Note:* Five overarching themes yielded from reflexive thematic analysis.

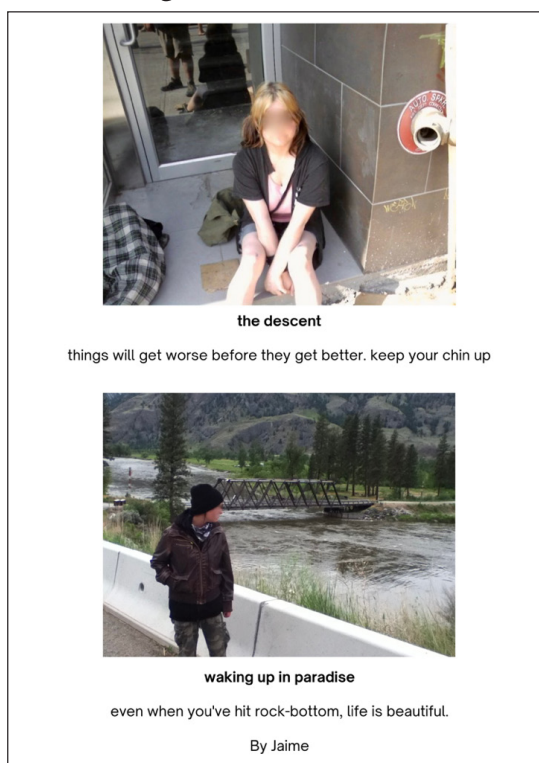


### ***Theme 1. Affective and Psychological Strategies of Resistance***

Affective and psychological strategies of resistance involve participants employing emotional or cognitive means to resist injustice. Affective strategies typically used emotions and cognitive strategies used psychological tools such as critical thinking, self-reflection, and self-regulation to challenge oppressive narratives and to expose imbalances of power. Psychological strategies may also involve less obvious approaches such as self-harm or substance use to cope, which may be both affective and cognitive.

In Jaime's submission "the descent & waking up in paradise" (see Figure 2), she offers two different images with two different captions that reflect the present theme. In the first image of a girl sitting on the ground in a vestibule of what appears to be a city building, Jaime demonstrates hopefulness about the future: "things will get worse before they get better. Keep your chin up." Here we can see that Jaime is offering encouragement and solidarity to her former self and potentially other young people reading the zine. In the second image, a person standing at the side of a highway looking out over a riverbank; the caption says, "even when you've hit rock-bottom, life is beautiful". Jaime is resisting despair rooted in housing injustice by practicing gratitude and an appreciation for her surroundings.

**Figure 2.** Zine Submission



*Note:* Affective and psychological strategies of resistance.

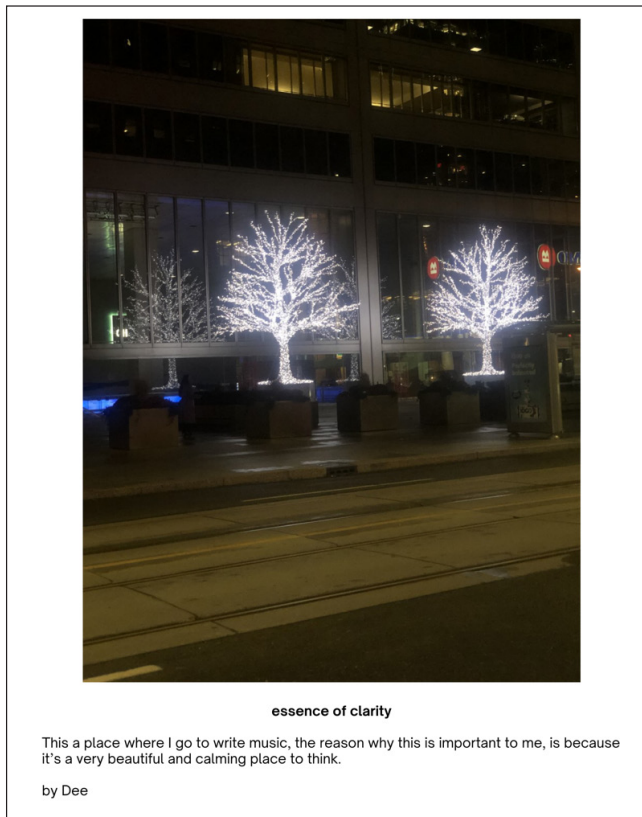


Emotions like anger and feelings of outrage are interpreted in the tone from pieces such as “Hear me out-” by Lucy and “And Soon” by c.j.. In both submissions, readings of anger and outrage are directly related to experiences of unmet material needs. Lucy speaks of being unable to live, pay rent, and access food. Similarly, c.j. speaks about food insecurity, defensive design, hostile architecture (Licht, 2020), and inaccessible rent. These expressions of anger are logical as both submissions speak about chaos related to organized abandonment (Kumanyika, 2020) and human rights violations. In their expression, these two pieces resist the silencing and erasure that is typical of young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice and expectations about the gendered experience of getting needs met—to be quiet, polite, and passive.

In a poem “It’s Getting Late” by Ivy, we see psychological acts of resistance. Ivy references the use of substances to cope with psychological pain: “It’s getting late and night has come/ Take away the pain with vodka, gin, and rum.” Here we see self-medication as a practical response to resist the psychological pain of housing injustice. In the following verse, she identifies cognitive strategies of “make-believe” to survive: “Make-believe used to mean teddy bears and fairy tales/ Now it’s the only way to survive/ Telling herself over and over and over: *‘I’m fine’*” (emphasis original). This cognitive strategy to cope with having no place to go is interpreted here as a creative act of resistance, using her imagination and positive self-talk to cope with her experience of structural abandonment (Kumanyika, 2020).

Dee shares an image of two trees lit up by LED lights in the financial district of Toronto. Dee titles this piece “essence of clarity” and shares that “This is a place where I go to write music, the reason why this is important to me, is because it’s a very beautiful and calming place to think” (see Figure 3). Here, the very pursuit of hobbies in public spaces in a city that has undergone significant austerity measures is an act of resistance. Geographically this is a space representing industry that is not generally dedicated to the hobbies of young people. By accessing this space to engage in creative activities, Dee is resisting narratives about who can take up space and where.

**Figure 3.** Zine Submission



*Note:* Affective and psychological strategies of resistance.

### ***Theme 2. Survival Strategies and Behaviours to Ensure Material Survival***

Survival strategies and behaviours refer to individual actions and decisions to ensure their material survival in oppressive conditions. This could include seeking basic resources, securing income or employment opportunities, creative problem-solving, such as finding alternative sources of support or developing new skills to adapt to changing circumstances. In other cases, survival behaviours may involve engaging in activities with increased risk or legal consequences such as sex work or theft. These strategies often respond to underlying systemic inequalities and injustices.

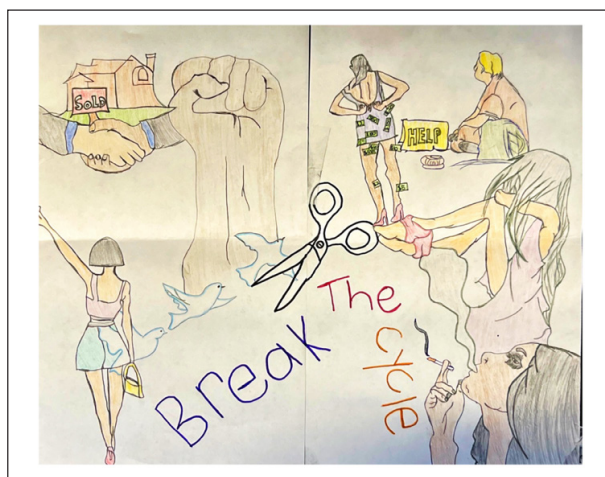
In her piece “Hear me out-”, Lucy describes “sleeping on a couch or floor” to avoid sleeping rough. Crashing in places that are not her own is a resistance strategy to avoid sleeping outside, which can be very dangerous for young people: “As a woman sleeping on the street you know you are in constant danger.” Lucy is describing her own advocacy against the gendered struggle to stay safe against “overrun” shelters and access “livable rent” by staying at places that are not her own. This does not necessarily imply that other spaces are safe but invites us to respect the ways

in which Lucy perceives what is safest for her even if it invites new forms of danger. Her choices do not necessarily relieve her from danger but reflect an autonomous choice to be respected.

In Ivy's poem, she describes sex work or survival sex as a means for survival, perhaps to gain a place to sleep: "It's getting late and as the sun goes low/ She does too, on a man she doesn't know/ It's getting late and she has no home/ This bed slept in by the girls that came before her/ This room is not her own". Here, sex work or survival sex keep her safe by remaining sheltered or receiving monetary resources to take care of herself. This choice also incurs new forms of danger like the possibility of exploitation and victimization.

In a piece entitled "Break The Cycle," Trynelle Thomas states that "the right side of my art piece represents the pain I faced while living on the streets and that feeling of hopelessness." Accompanying the text are four images: one includes a woman in heels opening or closing the zipper of her dress and sprinkled with dollar bills and the next is of a person asking for change beside a sign that says "HELP". Underneath this image is a female presenting person who sits with her head on her knees and underwear wrapped around her ankles. The final image is of another femme presenting person smoking a cigarette. The pictures suggest a variety of ways that Trynelle has ensured material survival. In this case, sex work and asking for money or panhandling<sup>1</sup> were strategies of material survival, even if portrayed in ways that suggest these experiences were difficult.

*Figure 4.* Zine Submission



*Note:* Survival strategies and behaviour to ensure material survival.

<sup>1</sup> The term "panhandling" is attached to profound stigma and does not adequately represent the ways individuals engaging in this behaviour are resisting financial oppression and seeking mutual aid.

### ***Theme 3. Theorizations About Good Living***

Theorizations about good living refer to the intuitive and personal understandings about what makes a fulfilling and meaningful life. This knowledge, informed by a variety of values and beliefs, may also be tacit, making it appear resistant to social or political norms. This theme also reflects the importance of responsive approaches to social policy and practice.

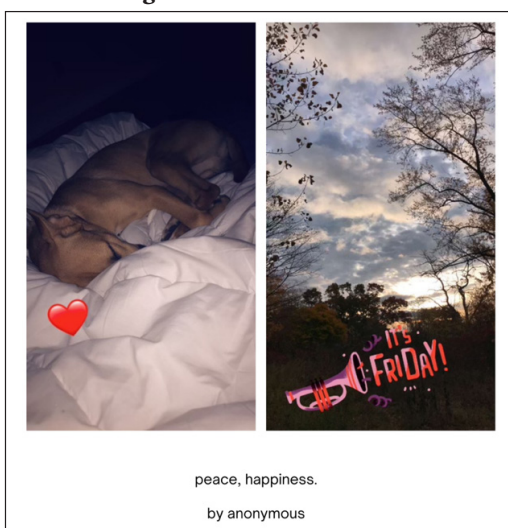
In Lucy's submission "Hear me out-" she provides many statements theorizing good living: for example, "I would really like to live. Not be alive, live. I want to be able to wake up in the morning and get out of bed. Not roll off my friend couch, not wake up in the middle of the night because it's too cold to sleep outside". In this contribution safe and stable housing is identified as a marker of good living. To that end, she wants:

to have a stove to make food, and not worry when I can use the bathroom next.  
I want cupboards to store that food – oh, and I want to be able to afford that  
food instead of watching my hard-earned money drain away to pay rent.

Here, Lucy speaks to the importance of food security, dignity, and livable wages to pay for a secure living space.

In a submission by anonymous (see Figure 5), we see two images. One of a dog curled up in a white duvet and another of outdoor scenery with trees and the caption "It's Friday" triumphantly exclaimed from a trumpet. Both images are captioned under the title "peace, happiness", both markers of good living. They are also attached to a bed in a house, and perhaps the end of the work week, which also suggests that good living is tied to labour practices that ensure breaks and rest for workers.

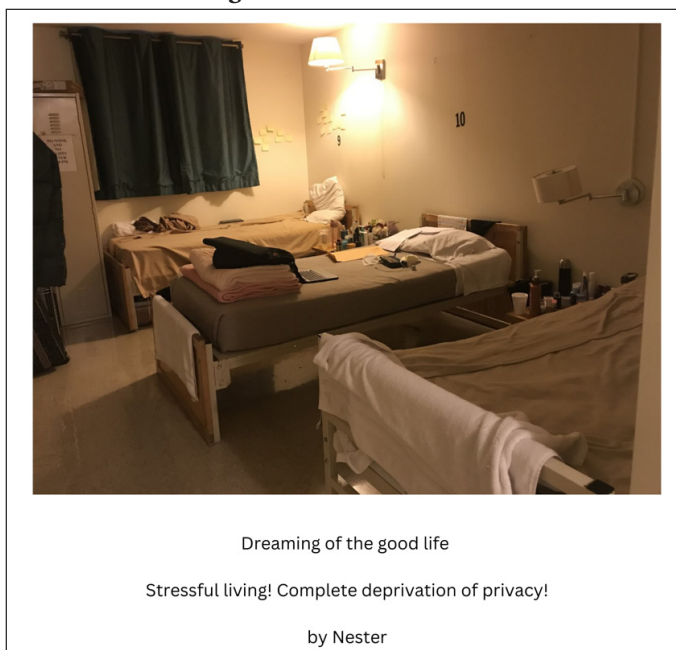
***Figure 5.*** Zine Submission



*Note:* Theorizations about good living.

Nester's submission entitled "Dreaming of the good life" shows a bedroom with three single beds in a small room that appears to be a shelter space. The caption attached to the photo reads "Stressful living! Complete deprivation of privacy!" (see Figure 6). Good living can be understood here as the opposite of stress and a lack of privacy.

**Figure 6.** Zine Submission



*Note:* Theorizations about good living.

Trynelle Thomas states, "I have been able to move out on my own started my healing journey which is w[ha]t the [left side] of this piece shows". The images that accompany the corresponding text include hands shaking in front of a house that says "Sold", a fist triumphantly lifted to the sky, and a female figure walking amongst images of doves. Here, we see that having a secure living situation, and specifically having the economic power to be able to buy a house, is important to her desires--as is being empowered represented by the fist and experiencing peace represented by the doves (see Figure 4).

#### ***Theme 4. Organized Abandonment and Other Normed Chaos***

Organized abandonment refers to deliberate disinvestment in particular communities or issues (Kumanyika, 2020), which can lead to chaos when the lack of resources and social support exacerbate existing problems and create new ones. Chaos here refers to a state of disorder, confusion, and unpredictability felt by participants, which manifested in many and different ways for each person. It often emerged as the tension between trying to get needs met within systems and structures that do not make this process clear or direct.

Lucy and c.j. explicitly speak about organized abandonment across a variety of structures such as housing and health care. Lucy states, “The homeless shelters are overrun and no one is bothering to try and build more”. Here, “no one” is interpreted as referring to people in positions of power. In response to experiences of housing injustice, Lucy questions, “Why has the world today made it seem like it’s only a choice?” when referring to being houseless. Lucy’s comments highlight the shifting of responsibility for housing injustices onto individuals, especially young people. c.j. also writes with urgency in her piece “And Soon” where she acknowledges the decay of structures that provide lifesaving services: “hotels turned to shelters for those in need, back to hotels. Mental health institutions overworked, underfunded, overcapacity, underappreciated”. c.j.’s concern is not only political abandonment but the willful neglect of important lifesaving services: “This society is NOT livable. It is trying to eradicate us, as if we’re weeds” and “It’s a passive, slow genocide”. The comparison of young people experiencing houselessness to “weeds” is both compelling and unsettling. It points to the felt and material experience of being intentionally abandoned as something undesirable and unwelcome. c.j.’s reference to this process as “genocide” is logical and shocking. c.j.’s writing underscores the cruel implication of withholding essential services, painting it as an act of ageism, ableism, and classism.

Adriana Sutherland speaks about literally being abandoned in “It Sounds Like a Summer”. She states that after 19 weeks (about four and a half months) of sleeping in an encampment, and five years of being unhoused, “I’m still homeless/ It’s like they forgot about me.” The “they” refers to the governments and social services she would rely on to improve her situation, while the length of her experience of housing injustice and use of the term “forgot” speaks to a gross injustice and failure on the part of provincial bodies to care for those in an urgent housing situation—especially for young people whose housing injustice is a violation of their right to safe and stable housing.

### ***Theme 5. Importance of Human Connection, Solidarity, and Radical Care***

This theme describes the fundamental importance of relationships and human connection in the project of healing from housing injustice. Here, human connection involves the emotional, psychological, and physical relationships that individuals co-create through shared solidarity, empathy, and reciprocity. Radical care involves a deep commitment to empathy and safety, particularly for those who have experienced extreme exclusion. Radical care took many forms including solidarity, practical help, and advocacy. Together, human connection and radical care reflect the potential for transformative justice through compassion.

Jaime’s zine contribution offers advice accompanying images of a girl, presumably a representation of herself. The guidance seems directed not only at the girl depicted but also at other insecurely housed young people who might encounter the zine (see Figure 2). Similarly, Manuella’s submission provides advice directly to other women and femmes experiencing housing injustice:

for people who are in my situation I would like to say it’s OK to be scared it’s  
OK to be nervous being in a shelter being homeless but I always keep your

---

head up better days will come ahead I would like I to know who were in my situation to use it as a steppingstone.

Manuella's comments resonate with the challenges faced by young individuals in shelter settings. Her words of solidarity validate their emotional journey while providing hope for brighter days. Both Jaime's and Manuella's contributions emphasize the therapeutic impact of forging connections with individuals who have undergone similar trials, stressing the importance of peer-based and lived-experience centered support practices.

Adriana Sutherland's "It Sounds Like a Summer" stresses the significance of community connection. Reflecting on her experience of sleeping in a tent within an encampment, she writes, "[t]he tent covered me/ I had a place to lay my head/ It was a community." And, "Many days out in the rain/ It would be muddy back there/ But it still felt safe". Contrary to popular views that portray encampments as incubators for crime and violence, inviting police action and state-sanctioned brutality, Adriana paints them as a haven of community safety.

Lynsey's "Nature and Beings" presents an image of a man sitting on a park bench in the fall holding a dog on his lap. An accompanying description reads, "Nature and beings—selfless in their truest form. Care for one another with the simplest touch of love" (see Figure 8). The combined visual and textual elements emphasize the transformative power of love and genuine connections. Symbolically, the park bench—a piece of public infrastructure often subjected to defensive design to deter unhoused people—stands as a poignant reminder of often overlooked human moments and the ongoing importance of common spaces for these kinds of connections.



*Figure 8.* Zine Submission



*Note:* Importance of human connection, solidarity, and radical care.

Similarly, Kantenah Arts' moving "Heartland" showcases a large heart and within it, many smaller hearts. Kantenah Arts describes the image as "The big heart is the Shelter. The hanging hearts, with ballasts of different sizes, are us." (see Figure 9). The personification of people and the shelter as hearts, are interpreted to represent the humanization of people who are unhoused, along with the place that provides them shelter, spotlighting radical care and loving kindness. This image is especially important because shelter spaces are often stereotyped as sites of violence.

*Figure 9. Zine Submission*

*Note:* Importance of human connection, solidarity, and radical care.

Finally, Trynelle Thomas, in “Break The Cycle,” demonstrates radical care in her desire to care for other people who have struggled in the same way she has: “I hope to one day overcome my trauma and hopefully to own property ranch and build rooms in that home to help and house those who have been in the same position I was once in. I wish to create a place for many to call home”. Trynelle’s submission is a testament to the importance of mutual aid in overcoming adversity.

## Discussion

This study invited young women and femmes to illustrate their resistance to housing injustice and the ways they create care through a zine. This collection revealed nuanced themes about their often-invisible experiences. Our discussion outlines key findings and offers recommendations for public health, service delivery, and future research.

The findings deepen our understanding of structural pathways and the maintenance of housing injustice through organized abandonment in several ways. First, our study affirms the

extant literature on the gendered experience of housing injustice by highlighting structural barriers within systems of support and disjointed services that contribute to distress (Gaetz et al., 2016; Milaney et al., 2019; Schwan et al., 2020). Our study illuminates the way in which structural supports fail to meet the gendered needs of young people in terms of financial, food, and housing security, underlining services that are absent in the care of women and femmes. The submissions suggest a universal basic income, livable wage, rent relief and regulation, rapid housing support, and timely and affordable mental healthcare are required for livability.

Second, this study provides evidence of the relationship between organized abandonment, housing injustice, and psychological suffering. The young people in this study are acutely aware of how the systems and structures that should serve them fail them and how it makes them feel. Distress was felt in vicious cycles of housing injustice, stagnated support, food insecurity, and job insecurity. The young people in this study described feeling angry, hopeless, “forgotten” (Adrianna) and like “weeds” (c.j.). Given these sentiments, it is understandable that the study participants experience distress as a direct result of the ways systems and structures have abandoned them. Feeling bad about needing to access the necessities for living implicates the mental health of young people experiencing housing injustice. Within this study, there is a clear link between organized abandonment and psychological suffering. This finding extends mental healthcare beyond individual service delivery to policy interventions.

Third, the zine submissions invite us to complicate and depathologize young people’s negotiations of risk. In our analysis, we refuse to intellectualize young people’s choices as problematic and instead see young people as autonomous decision makers who ought to be trusted. In the absence of stable and long-term pathways to housing justice, all moves to seek housing security incur some level of risk and are still valid. This finding is commensurate with assumptions of harm reduction, to recognize that risk is involved in *all* behaviours, even those deemed ‘safe’ and, as such, we should consider what is perceived as ‘safer’. Choices to engage in shelter living, tenting, couch surfing, survival sex, or sleeping rough hinged on each individual’s perception of risk and represented the ways in which young people interpreted what was safer. Risk is negotiated in context and does not preclude participants of this study from criminalization, exploitation, and victimization.

Fourth, this study helps us to theorize resistance to housing injustice and organized abandonment in ways that center harm reduction principles of pragmatism and autonomy (Ansloos & Gardner, 2023). Through an analysis of their affective, cognitive, and behavioural strategies, young people emerge as active agents in their wellbeing and deeply invested in living good lives. In many cases, acts of resistance were illegal and appeared to violate the norms of systems such as sex work, tenting, and “panhandling”. This observation is consistent with Clay (2023) who argues that ‘risky’ approaches to self-care are often deeply considered and are not expressions of “reckless abandon”. Morality politics combined with the developmental period of participants obscures our ability to see that the young people are responding to structural failures and not acting from a place of deviance (Yang & Tuck, 2014). We submit that the illustrated acts of resistance are logical responses to suffering. They are pragmatic and autonomous in the unique contexts experienced by participants.

Finally, the findings of this zine make a strong case for the importance of human connection, solidarity, and radical care in the gendered experience of healing from housing injustice. We see in personal reflections and advice to other young people in shared situations profound empathy and a desire to lift each other's spirits. The submissions evoked a range of emotions and a shared desire for change to promote good living and wellness in youth and emerging adulthood. This zine reminds its readers that healing from conditions of housing injustice as well as its related psychological distress cannot be done in silo—it is a collective struggle. This zine provides strong support for peer-support initiatives and political and policy-based applications of radical care and unconditionality.

This study responds to the calls to action outlined in the National Youth Homelessness Report (Gaetz et al., 2016) and the State of Women's Homelessness Literature Review (Schwan et al., 2020) regarding the urgency of identifying solutions to homelessness among this population. While the voices of young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice have always been present, rarely has space been created within a research context to meaningfully amplify their strength-based stories. In many ways, this zine evokes clear sites of intervention for young people experiencing housing injustice and mental health concerns in ways that are re-politicized and not complex as research often suggests.

## **Implications**

To make these shifts to political and policy uptake, the Ottawa Charter of Public Health (World Health Organization, 1986) offers a useful framework to organize study implications. This model proposes three levels for intervening in health disparities: First, “downstream” interventions seek to improve health disparities at the individual level, typically at service provision, reacting to the immediate needs of an individual or community and providing short-term solutions. Second, “midstream” interventions seek to improve public health disparities at the policy level. Finally, “upstream” interventions seek to address the “causes of the cause” by intervening upon the ecological dimensions of public health disparities (National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, 2024, p. 2). Their value is that they may create long-term and sustainable solutions.

## ***Downstream Recommendations***

At the downstream level, the young zine participants demonstrated their valuable knowledge about their experiences and a desire to share their personal insights with youth going through similar experiences and their perspectives on public health and policies. It is therefore recommended that agencies serving young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice create and maintain peer support programs where people with lived and living experience may be paid equitably for their human services. Other downstream interventions include participatory governance strategies where young people may connect with their local governments and influence the policies intended to serve them.

***Midstream Recommendations***

At the level of midstream intervention, this zine provides validation for taking harm reduction seriously and expanding these services. In the absence of clear pathways to housing stability, participants demonstrated various strategies for coping with and resisting conditions of violence. This zine points toward the value of taking up a harm reduction lens—a care approach emphasizing meeting people where they are, while prioritizing their own goals for well-being—in the care of young people experiencing housing injustice. Although harm reduction has been prominently associated with substance use, it is also applicable to a range of situations described in this study (Ansloos & Gardner, 2023). These could include resourcing encampments, rent relief, social housing, the creation of a living wage, and universal basic income. In the absence of organized care by policy makers, providing harm reduction is not just good sense, but a way to keep young people safe.

***Upstream Recommendations***

At the level of upstream intervention, this zine demonstrates the ways in which young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice are acutely aware of how organized abandonment resulting from neoliberalism and austerity measures played out in their lives. Policy makers must take seriously the psychological and material impacts of their choices not merely because that is their job in serving their constituents, but because youth housing injustice is a human rights issue. We suggest that governments and policy makers shift from neoliberal housing and social policies to a human rights approach that values unconditionality. Housing must be provided without prior requirements. Barriers to housing like age requirements or maintaining a certain quality of mental health or health status are institutionally violent. Considering this suggestion, policy makers must take heed from people with lived and living experience and interrogate their own *willingness* to actualize change.

***Research Recommendations***

This zine's creation is at the intersections of qualitative inquiry, activism, art, and policy. In its conception, this study wanted to “do research” differently. The result is a valuable collection of art and knowledge that was returned to the community. The timeliness of this project (unlike academic publishing) contributes to the project's ethic towards justice. This study demonstrates the value of social engagement by centering the wisdom of people with lived and living experience in research that intends to serve them. It also emphasizes the importance of researching in ways that are life affirming and desire driven (Tuck, 2009). Importantly, the zine suggests that future research must investigate the actors, structures, and systems complicit in projects of organized abandonment. The “make work cycle” of research on “homelessness” has spent a great deal of time, fiscal investment, and energy trying to develop interventions and strategies to address housing injustice that ultimately maintain the status quo (Ilyniak, 2022). Instead, it is recommended that researchers channel their efforts to better understand why various levels of government actively ignore evidence that supports practices that would greatly improve the lives of those most vulnerable. To increase accountability and destabilize

power structures within the housing industrial complex, we need research that troubles the scarce political will to make change.

## Conclusion

This study created a strengths-based and desire-driven space for young women and femmes to celebrate the ways in which they resist housing injustice and create care. Each zine submission has identified important themes focused on affective and psychological strategies of resistance; strategies and behaviours to ensure material survival; felt knowledge about good living; recognition of organized abandonment and other normed chaos; and the importance of human connection and radical care. The themes pointed towards considerations for therapeutic practice, policy, and research. Importantly, this zine makes clear various sites of intervention for young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice that are not complicated. What remains clear from this artistic research endeavor is that arts-based research that rejects damage-centered narratives has transformative possibilities.

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