

CAMH Shelter Safety Study

Economic and Community Development Committee
Toronto Shelter and Support Services
April 30, 2024



Background

- The shelter system underwent significant and dramatic transformation to respond to the unprecedented situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including moving thousands of people into new spaces in a matter of months.
- Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, shelter system pressures have been compounded by the complex health needs of people experiencing homelessness as well as the ongoing opioid poisoning crisis.
- Toronto's shelter system has expanded over 30% since the start of the pandemic, however, a similar expansion in services has not been seen in the provincially funded health system including crisis beds, withdrawal management services, and treatment programs for people experiencing homelessness.

Context

- In 2021, Toronto Shelter and Support Services (TSSS) reached out to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) for support in looking at the issue of safety in the shelter system and contributed funding to the study.
- A number of initiatives were already underway to enhance safety in the shelter system.
- The intent for conducting a study was to develop evidence and recommendations to support and guide continued improvements in Toronto's shelter system.

Shelter Safety Study

- Two-year, multi-methods study led by CAMH researchers, working in collaboration with TSSS
- **Research objective:** to examine the factors that contribute to physical and psychological safety in shelters for staff and service users, including causes and consequences of service restrictions and shelter-based violence.

Study funding: City of Toronto, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and Canadian Institutes of Health Research

The lead researchers have no disclosures

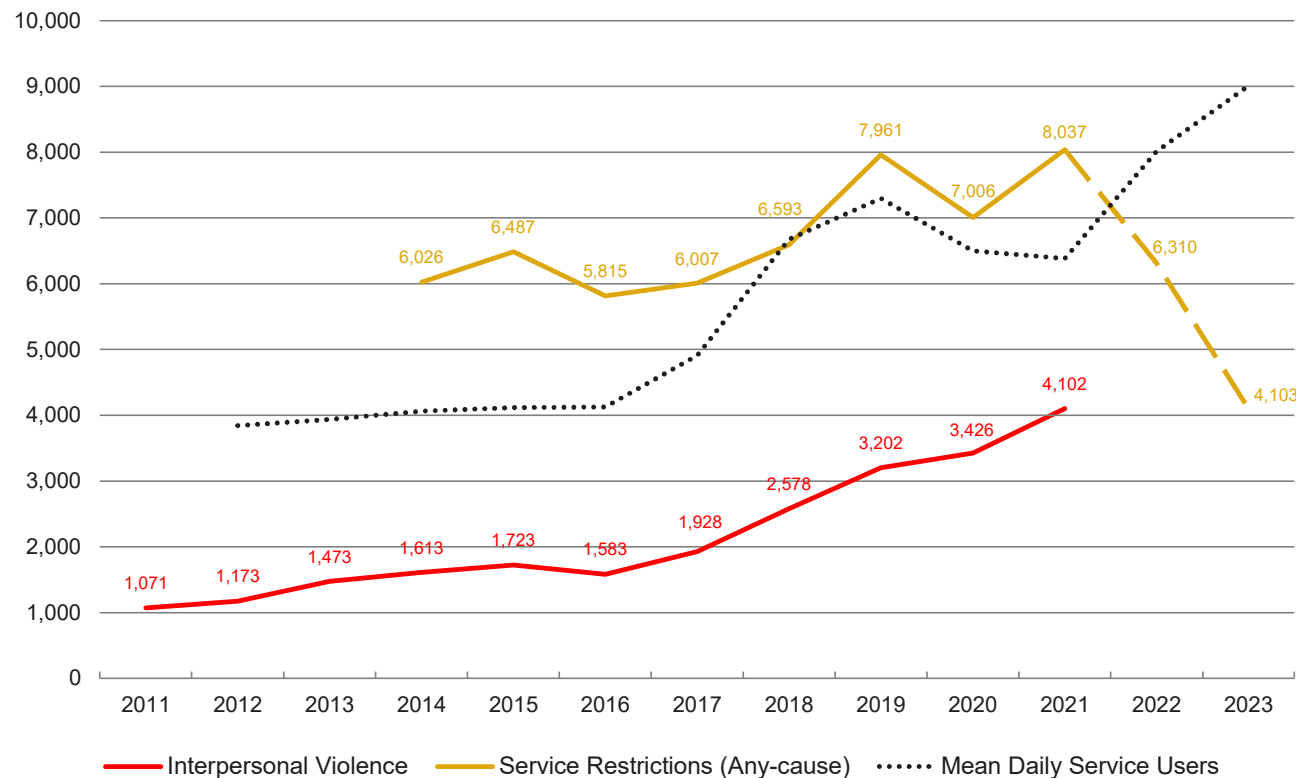


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Trends in Shelter-based Violence and Service Restrictions

Annual Number of Any-cause Critical Incidents and Service Restrictions



Higher Risk Service Users with Unmet Needs



17 service users had 522 service restrictions in 2021 (6.5% of all restrictions that year)



24 service users had 638 critical incidents in 2021 (6.6% of all incidents that year)

Key Factors in Shelter-based Violence

SMIS Data Analysis Findings

- COVID-19 pandemic (physical assaults, verbal abuse toward staff, threats, and harassment each significantly increased from March 11, 2020-December 31, 2021)
- Shelter crowdedness
- Winter season

Qualitative Interview Findings

- Hopelessness and frustration associated with homelessness
- Shelter policies that limit privacy, control, and autonomy
- Poor staff communication and ineffective interventions

“Poverty has become so much more entrenched [in the world], and I feel like there’s hopelessness, and like that culture of homelessness isn’t about a season of your life, it is your whole life now ... there’s just a hopelessness, there’s no options for folks and I feel like that hopelessness is results in more violence.”

– Key informant (healthcare provider)

“A client asks for a sandwich and staff says, ‘No.’ And, then the client freaks out, understandably, and then staff can’t come back from it.”

– Shelter staff (management)

Consequences of Service Restriction for Service Users

Qualitative Interview Findings from Service Users Who Had Service Restriction in the Past Year

- Intense feelings of anger, perceived unfairness in decision-making, and fear and abandonment
- Health and social outcomes (increased substance use, suicidality, lost connections to supports, sense of mistrust after re-sheltering)
- 13 participants (47%) experienced unsheltered homelessness for one or more nights immediately following their service restriction
- Cycling into and through homeless and health services following restrictions was common

"I was scared and I was frightened. I wasn't sure what to do."
– Male youth

"I was left with nobody, no support, nobody helping me."
– Adult woman

"It ended up to me being outside for like six months ... then I moved in with a buddy of mine for a few months ... he ended up losing his place ... I was in tent again for another month or two and then I got back into this place."
– Adult man

The Shelter Staff Perspective

- 36.2% of shelter staff feel very or somewhat unsafe in the workplace
 - Women feel significantly less safe at work than men
- Black and Indigenous shelter staff are significantly more likely to experience daily verbal abuse involving racism
- Over 70% of shelter staff are supportive or very supportive of service restrictions
- Key concerns with service restrictions:
 - Lack of consistency
 - No mechanisms to produce behavioural change
 - Limited available shelter beds for referral

“...as a Black woman, issues around violence against Black women is very relevant to me and that happens a lot in here ... those things should be talked about because we, as Black women, we experience more violence than any other race...”
– Shelter staff (direct service)

“So, I find [service restrictions are] probably one of the most challenging pieces of our work, because we are an emergency shelter, people have a right to shelter. But, people also have a right to safety”
– Shelter staff (management)

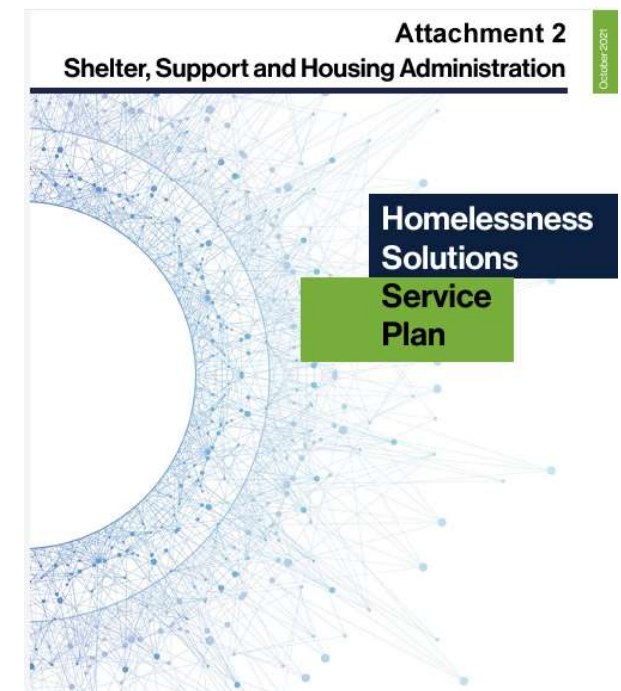
Study Recommendations

The final report proposes **22 recommendations** across five domains: support services; built environment and space; resources, policies, and procedures; staff training and education; and research, evaluation, and data use. Some recommendations include:

- Strengthen mental health and substance use supports for service users, with a focus on crisis intervention and secondary prevention following violence/service restrictions
- Develop a specialized shelter program for high-risk service users
- Establish more supports for shelter staff following critical incidents, including debriefing, paid days off for workplace violence exposure, and expanded access to mental health supports
- Prioritize the reduction of crowdedness in shelters through smaller programs with greater privacy
- Reduce service restriction harms and enhance consistency in decision-making, including through the use of non-bed loss restrictions and enhanced information sharing
- Develop performance indicators on shelter safety to identify emergent trends and promising practices

Addressing Safety in Toronto's Shelter System

- TSSS is committed to prioritizing and continuously improving shelter safety for staff service users.
- The division has undertaken a number of initiatives to address safety in the shelter system.
- These actions and initiatives support the Council approved Homelessness Solutions Service Plan's key priority “enhance safety and quality” of shelters.



Improving Safety for Staff

- TSSS is implementing the Behavioural Risk Alert Safety System (BRASS) to increase workplace safety for all shelter providers
 - Increases information sharing across programs about clients with a history of violent behaviour, with the goal of supporting shelter staff in proactive safety planning.
 - The system will launch in the Shelter Management Information System (SMIS) in 2024.
- Over the past two years, TSSS has implemented initiatives to improve staff mental health and wellbeing.
 - This includes coordinating debrief sessions for staff impacted after serious occurrence, developing a divisional Psychological Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and partnering with the Toronto Shelter Network to support grief and loss within the homelessness sector.

Improving Safety for Clients

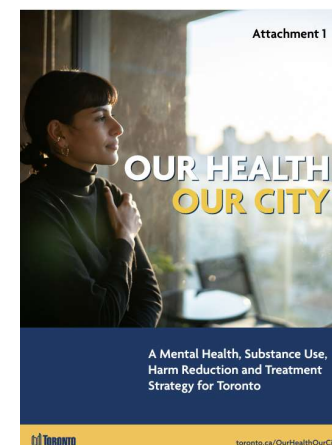
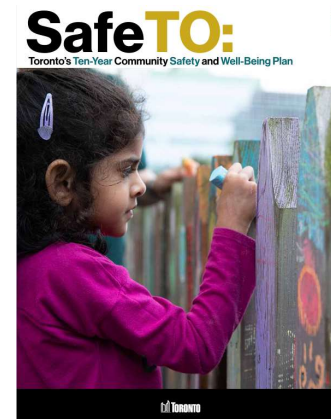
- In 2023, TSSS released an update to the Toronto Shelter Standards, and introduced new mandatory Standards for Confronting Anti-Black Racism to improve the experiences and remove barriers to services that may exist for Black people accessing the shelter system.
- TSSS continues to strengthen harm reduction supports in shelters, in response to the drug toxicity crisis, in partnership with Toronto Public Health, Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre, The Neighbourhood Group, shelter providers and people with lived experience of homelessness and substance use.
 - These partnerships and initiatives have contributed to a decrease in suspected non-fatal overdoses at shelter locations over the last year.

Building Sector Capacity

- The City has invested \$14 million to date in non-profit shelter providers to address the wage and benefit gap between community and City operations.
 - Additional funds assist with staff retention, training, service levels and stability.
- The City continues to work with sector and intergovernmental partners to facilitate health, mental health and harm reduction services across the homelessness service system partners.
 - The Ontario government has invested \$15 million this year to connect people experiencing homelessness in the City to primary health care, mental health and other supports they need.
 - TSSS has invested \$2.8M this year in harm reduction partnerships in shelters and outreach programs to support mental health and substance use programming.
- Unique and culturally-appropriate mental health supports are being provided for people accessing specific Indigenous-serving shelters.

Building Safer Communities

- Alignment with:
 - Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy
 - SafeTO: Community Safety and Well-being Plan
 - Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto
 - Work of the Community Crisis Response Program



Next Steps

- The City is developing a Shelter Safety Action Plan to provide a roadmap to prioritizing and continuously improving shelter safety for staff and service users.
- Work has started and will include engagement this year.
- The action plan will aim to:
 - Continue the work underway to address safety in the shelter system
 - Implement the CAMH study recommendations
 - Collaborate with partners to enhance this work

