

ON ONE DAY, 232 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SHELTERS AND TRANSITION HOUSES ACROSS CANADA RECORDED HOW MANY WOMEN AND CHILDREN THEY HELPED. HERE IS WHAT THEY SHARED.

# SHELTER VOICES



**S**helter Voices 2019 is the sixth national survey of shelters and transition houses (THs) that serve women and children affected by violence. Conducted by Women's Shelters Canada, this one-day snapshot<sup>1</sup> offers a sense of the daily reality of shelters/THs across the country, including how many women they are able to support and the challenges they face in doing so. In the context of an aging population, this edition of Shelter Voices also looks more closely at the services that shelters/THs offer to older women experiencing violence.

On a single day, 232<sup>2</sup> shelters/THs were housing and helping a total of 5,409 women and 3,578 children. Of these, 1,824 women and 1,527 children were staying in shelters/THs, while an additional 3,585 women and 2,051 children were being supported through outreach services and other programming without staying at the shelter/TH itself.

## Demand for Shelter Services Is Increasing

495 women and 253 children requested shelter at 123 shelter/THs on the snapshot day. Of these requests, 98 women and 60 children were taken in, while 397 women and 193 children were turned away due to a lack of capacity and resources. With 39% of responding shelters/THs having no available space, 78.8% of potential new residents could not be accommodated on the snapshot day.

While the number of women staying at shelters/THs has remained relatively stable compared to previous years, the number of women accessing non-residential services at shelters/THs was much higher in 2019 (see table). In addition, the turn-away rate increased slightly compared to previous years.

Year	Number of women staying at a shelter/TH	Number of women accessing other services	Total number of women helped	Turn-away rate
2019	1,824	3,585	5,409	78.8%
2018	1,807	1,806	3,613	75%
2017	1,432	1,712	3,144	75%
2016	1,760	2,663	4,423	73%

### ***Did you know?***

*Although not all shelters/THs collect this information, of the women helped on the snapshot day, 100 were known to be pregnant, and 87 were known to have been threatened by a gun.*



# Violence Against Older Women

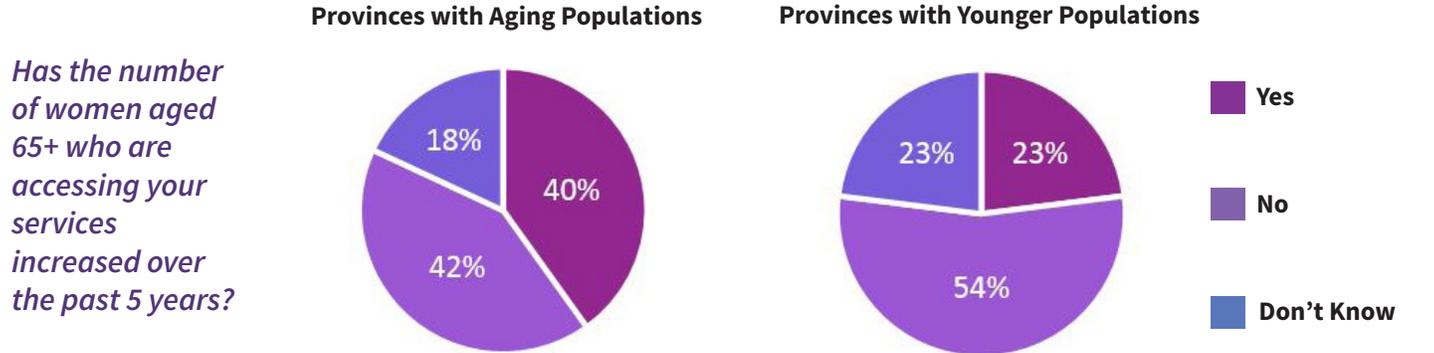
Overall, women 65 years and older made up only a small portion of the women staying at or receiving help from shelters/THs on the snapshot day. Shelters/THs reported that 89 older women were staying at their shelter/TH on the snapshot day, while an additional 186 women aged 65+ received help through outreach or other programming.

However, there were important regional differences. As the table below shows, in provinces with an aging population, older women made up a slightly higher proportion of those accessing shelter/TH services compared to provinces and territories with younger populations.



	Provinces with a younger population (MB, SK, AB, YK, NT, NU)	Provinces with an aging population (BC, ON, QC, NB, NS, PEI, NL)
Women aged 65+ staying at the shelter/TH on snapshot day	2% of total	5.6% of total
Women aged 65+ helped on snapshot day	2.6% of total	6% of total

Furthermore, shelters/THs in provinces with aging populations were almost twice as likely to say that the number of women aged 65+ who are accessing their services has increased over the past 5 years. **Given these results, it seems likely that, as the population ages, shelters/THs will be serving an increasing number of older women.**



## Many Shelters/THs Are Adapting to Meet the Needs of Older Women

Many shelters/THs have already begun to adapt their services to meet the needs of older women. 42% of the shelters/THs that responded to the Shelter Voices survey said they have some kind of program or service specifically adapted to women aged 65+. Of these shelters/THs:

- 75% have partnerships with community agencies to enable them to better support women aged 65+;
- 31.9% use specific outreach strategies to reach women aged 65+;
- 21% offer specific programming for women aged 65+; and
- 9% use an adapted risk assessment tool.

In addition, some shelters/THs have specific units for older women, or use a client-centred approach to customize plans to the needs of individual older women.

# Older Women Affected by Violence Have Unique, Complex Needs

ATIRA Women's Resource Society in British Columbia and the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) have both done significant research into the intersections of elder abuse and violence against women (VAW), and attempted to identify promising practices for shelters and transition houses.<sup>3</sup> Their work has shown that older women experiencing violence often face unique challenges when seeking support or leaving a violent situation. Responses from the 232 shelters/THs that participated in the Shelter Voices survey support this finding.

The survey asked shelters/THs to identify the ways in which the needs of older women fleeing violence are different from those of younger women. Their responses highlighted the following themes:

*“ Women with complex physical needs do sometimes require more staff time and attention. Which we are happy to provide but when we have women with these complex needs our levels of staffing can seem less than desirable. ”*

- **Older women often face more significant health issues** related to the effects of aging and, in some cases, to long histories of abuse. As a result, older women may require more specialized care while at the shelter/TH and may have more limited housing options afterwards.

- **Older women may face more challenges accessing and living at shelters/THs.** In WSC's national survey, nearly three-quarters (72%) of the shelters/THs who responded felt that accessibility was a challenge at their shelter/TH.<sup>4</sup> This can create a barrier when serving older women with reduced mobility. In addition, older women may find it challenging to live in a communal environment with young children and lots of comings and goings.



- **There are fewer beds available for single women.** Many shelters/THs have limited beds for single women, in order to accommodate women with children. This can make it hard for older women to find space at a shelter/TH, as they are usually not accompanied by children.

- **Older women are often living on a fixed income.** These women may have left the workforce already or they may have spent most of their lives caring for children at home, placing them in a precarious financial position. In addition, older women often experience ageism when trying to find employment or they may be unable to work due to health issues.

- **Older women may have different beliefs.** They may have grown up in a generation that normalized abuse, and so they may feel stigma around naming or leaving an abusive situation.

- **Older women may be reluctant to leave for family reasons.** They may be responsible for caring for their partner or for grandchildren, and feel unable to leave as a result. In addition, they may fear that if they leave, they will lose access to their grandchildren. Finally, older women may already have limited family and social connections, and so they may be scared of becoming even more isolated if they leave.

*“ Older women sometimes minimize their experience and express feeling guilty for taking a bed that could be used by a younger woman or child. ”*

*Women of more maturity have lived their lives longer and are often ready to be settled, not starting over.*

*North American society says older women don't have as much value as younger women and this shows in service provision. ”*

# Lack of Capacity and Funding Act as a Barrier to Serving Older Women

As a result of the unique circumstances described above, shelters/THs shared that older women often end up staying longer at shelters/THs and require more “walk-beside” support during their stay. Respondents shared that a lack of resources makes it difficult for them to provide the longer-term or intensive support that older women may need.

“ *We lack financial resources to hire human resources that would allow us to adapt our services to older women (accompaniment, changes to the physical space, etc.).* ”

In particular, shelters/THs emphasized that they often do not have the staff capacity to address the complex needs of many older women. Shelter/TH staff may not have the training required to provide specialized care to women with complex health or cognitive challenges. Furthermore, older women sometimes require additional support to get to appointments and navigate systems. For single-staffed shelters/THs, it can be hard to provide this level of support while also supporting other clients with their own complex needs.

Shelters/THs also highlighted that there is a lack of funding for shelter/TH beds for single women and for programming that meets the specific needs of different groups of women. In addition, shelters/TH pointed out that many communities lack broader services – such as medical services, adapted housing, and public transport – to support older women. As a result, shelter/TH staff may not be confident that an older woman will continue to receive the support she needs after leaving the shelter/TH. In particular, shelters/THs emphasized that it can be hard for older women to find adapted housing at an affordable cost.

## Conclusion

As Canada’s population ages, it is likely that the number of older women in need of the services offered by VAW shelters and transition houses will increase. It will be important for shelters/THs to reach out to older women to inform them of the services available and to ensure that they can respond to their unique needs. While shelters/THs are currently doing their best to support older women with their existing resources, as demand increases, additional funding will be required to ensure shelters/THs have the staff capacity, specialized training, and accessible buildings required to accommodate and support older women.

## Further Resources

- The Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses’ [Aging Without Violence](#) project, which has generated [informative research](#) and [resource documents](#)
- The Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters’ [Abuse of Older Adults: Guidelines for Developing Coordinated Community Response Models](#) report
- ATIRA’s report on [Promising Practices Across Canada for Housing Women Who Are Older and Fleeing Abuse](#)

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Shelter Voices is produced by Women’s Shelters Canada. We work as a unified voice for systemic change to end violence against women, while providing leadership for collaboration and knowledge exchange among shelters and transition houses across the country. WSC thanks the National Union of Public and General Employees for their contribution to Shelter Voices and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers for providing printing services. Photos from [Unsplash](#).

Learn more at [www.endvaw.ca](http://www.endvaw.ca) and on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at [@endvawnetwork](#).

<sup>1</sup>To capture data for the “snapshot,” respondents provided information from a single day between January 28 and February 10, 2019.

<sup>2</sup>232 respondents represent a response rate of about 40% of the total number of VAW shelters/THs across Canada.

<sup>3</sup>Atira Women’s Resource Society. (2015). Promising Practices Across Canada for Housing Women Who Are Older and Fleeing Abuse; OAITH, Aging Without Violence Project. Available online at [www.oaith.ca/oaith-work/aging-without-violence](http://www.oaith.ca/oaith-work/aging-without-violence).

<sup>4</sup>Maki, K. (2019 forthcoming). “More Than a Bed: A National Profile of VAW Shelters and Transition Houses.” Will be available online: <https://endvaw.ca/wsc-resources>.