

## Background

- In Vancouver, there were 2,095 individuals (547 unsheltered and 1,548 sheltered) affected by homelessness in the year 2020 [1]. The poor living conditions place people at risk for substance abuse, development of mental disorders, and physical illness related to infection [2].
- Homeless women are a vulnerable subpopulation due to being at greater risk for partner and sexual violence compared to men [3].
- The current analysis applies a gendered lens to fill existing gaps regarding the unique needs and experiences of homeless women, providing insight towards improving gender-specific housing and harm-reduction services.

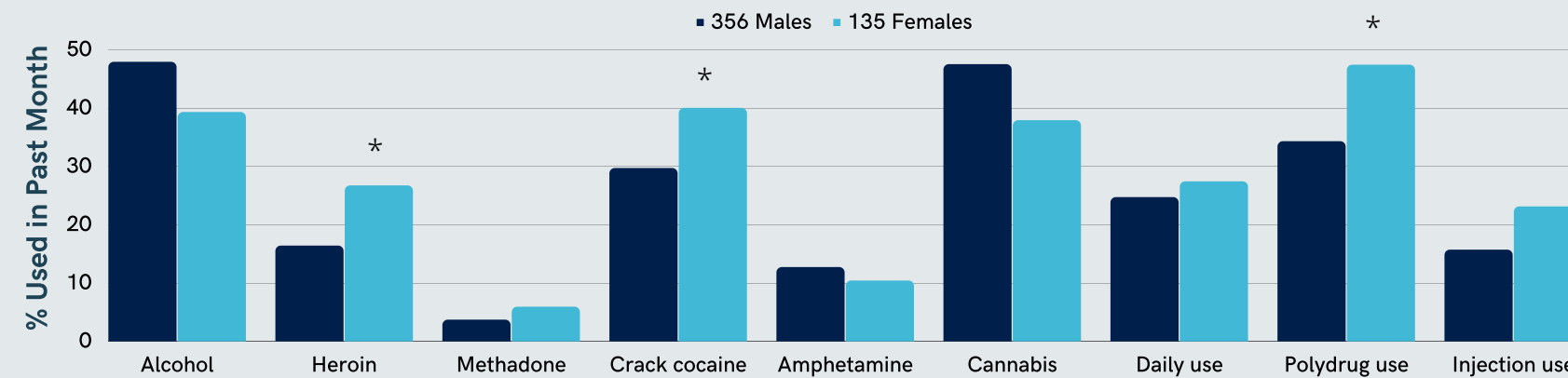
## Objectives

- Explore the demographic profiles and victimization rates in a sample of homeless adults with mental illness in Vancouver, British Columbia
- Identify differences in substance use patterns between homeless men and women.

## Methods

- Between 2009 and 2011, the Vancouver At-Home Study included a RCT of a Housing First intervention for homeless mentally ill adults in Vancouver, British Columbia. The current study utilizes the baseline data collected from 491 participants.
- Sociodemographic details were measured with the Demographics, Housing, Vocational, and Service Use History (DSHH) questionnaire. Substance use over the past month was indexed using the Maudsley Addiction Profile (MAP).

## Results



7 (2%) men and 4 (3%) women experienced an overdose in the month prior to the survey. Homeless women were more likely to use heroin (27% vs. 16%), crack cocaine (40% vs. 30%), injection drug use (23% vs. 15%), and more than one drug at a time (47% vs. 34%). More men reported using alcohol, amphetamine, and cannabis, but differences did not reach significance.

	356 Males	135 Females	p
Absolutely homeless	284 (79.8)	98 (72.6)	0.087
Aboriginal ethnicity	45 (12.6)	29 (21.5)	0.014*
Did not complete high school	211 (59.8)	65 (48.1)	0.020*
Have children	72 (20.7)	50 (37.3)	<0.001*
Has partner	12 (3.4)	13 (9.8)	0.004*
Unwanted sexual activity in past 6 months	16 (4.5)	13 (9.9)	0.027*

Most participants were absolutely homeless at the time of recruitment and the median age was 41 years. Significant differences were observed for gender in regards to demographics and victimization on the streets:

Women were more likely to identify as Aboriginal (22% vs. 13%), have children (37% vs. 21%), have partners (10% vs. 3%), and to have been forced or attempted into unwanted sexual activity in the past 6 months (10% vs. 5%). Men were less likely to have completed high school (60% vs. 48%).

## Discussion

Our results indicate that a greater proportion of homeless women in our sample exhibit risky patterns of substance use and experience greater gender-specific burdens such as having children and unwanted sexual activity. These disproportionate hardships demand the need for better accessibility and development of trauma-informed and gender-specific services for homeless women.

Given that homeless women are more likely to engage in opioid and polydrug use than men, they may be at greater risk of overdose. Their risk of overdose-related death is of particular concern with Vancouver being at the epicentre of the escalating opioid crisis in BC.

Further research is needed to better elucidate the relationship between gender and substance use in the homeless population.

## References

- Homeless Count. (2020). City of Vancouver.
- Jones, AA et al. (2020). *PLOS Medicine* 17(7): e1003172.
- Schwan, K et al. (2020). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.