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“It’s no foundation, there’s no stabilization, you’re just scattered”: A qualitative study of the institutional circuit of recently-evicted people who use drugs

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ABSTRACT

People who use drugs (PWUD) commonly experience housing instability due to intersecting structural vulnerabilities (e.g., drug prohibition, discriminatory housing policies), and prejudicial or illegal evictions are common. In Vancouver, Canada, evictions have proliferated in the Downtown Eastside, a historically low-income neighbourhood with high rates of drug use and housing instability, resulting in many PWUD being evicted into homelessness. This study characterizes housing trajectories of recently-evicted PWUD through the lens of the institutional circuit of homelessness, and explores how wider contexts of structural vulnerability shape experiences within this. Qualitative interviews were conducted with PWUD recently evicted in the Downtown Eastside (<60 days). Peer research assistants recruited 58 PWUD through outreach activities. All PWUD participated in baseline interviews on the causes and contexts of evictions. Follow-up interviews were completed with 41 participants 3–6 months later, focusing on longer-term impacts of eviction, including housing trajectories. Most participants were evicted into homelessness, remaining so at follow-up. Participants described patterns of residential instability consisting of frequent cycling between shelters, streets, and kin-based networks. While participants normalized this cycling as characteristic of their marginalized social positions, narratives revealed how the demands of the institutional circuit deepened vulnerabilities and prolonged experiences of homelessness. Experiences were framed by participants’ (in)ability to navigate survival needs (e.g., shelter, drug use), with tensions and trade-offs between needs increasing participants’ and their peers’ risks of harms. Constructions of agency further shaped experiences; accounts highlighted tensions between the control inherent to indoor spaces and participants’ need for autonomy. Findings demonstrate how the demands of the institutional circuit foregrounded structural

vulnerabilities to perpetuate cycles of instability. Interventions that address survival needs and preserve agency will be necessary to mitigate risks within the institutional circuit, in tandem with upstream interventions that target housing vulnerability and broader social-structural conditions (e.g., poverty, affordability) that entrap recently-evicted PWUD in the institutional circuit.

1. Introduction

Across North American cities, policies favouring redevelopment and disinvestment in affordable housing, including the maintenance of current and construction of new affordable housing, have rendered urban poor and drug-using communities disproportionately impacted by housing vulnerability and homelessness (Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Mitchell, 2020; Tsai and Huang, 2018). Residential eviction is among the forms of housing vulnerability to which people who use drugs (PWUD) are particularly vulnerable (Fleming et al., 2019; Montgomery et al., 2017; Tsai and Huang, 2018), especially within low-income neighbourhoods (Bardwell et al., 2018; Desmond, 2012).

Understanding residential evictions of PWUD is of particular importance in Vancouver, Canada's Downtown Eastside (DTES)—a low income inner-city neighbourhood with high rates of poverty, housing vulnerability, and drug use, and a strong history of community-based activism (Boyd et al., 2017; Nowell and Masuda, 2020). Eviction of the poorest residents of the DTES has been ongoing for decades; an estimated 500–850 people were mass evicted from the DTES and surrounding areas in favour of more tourist-appropriate housing in advance of a world's fair, Expo '86 (Hulchanski et al., 1991). More recently, the DTES has succumbed to the decades of development policies oriented towards gentrification that have displaced poor communities for new condominium developments, and contributed to a chronic shortage of affordable housing (Fast and Cunningham, 2018; Gurstein and Yan, 2019). The shrinking supply of affordable housing in the DTES now consists predominantly of single room occupancy (SRO) hotels, which are associated with numerous adverse outcomes such as HIV transmission, overdose, and violence (Collins et al., 2018; Lazarus et al., 2011; Shannon et al., 2006), yet are still considered the default affordable housing option for structurally vulnerable PWUD. These buildings were originally intended as a form of temporary housing for a transient workforce in the early 20th century, and as such, SRO units average 100 square feet and feature varying access to shared amenities (e.g., bathrooms) (Knight, 2015). This stock has been repurposed to house the urban poor over time, although processes of urbanization and abandonment of public health, maintenance, and sanitation responsibilities has resulted in a rapidly deteriorating SRO housing stock that is often not suitable for human habitation (Masuda & the Right to Remain Collective, 2021). The poor conditions and precarity framing these environments render SROs as a form of vulnerable housing—even equivalent to homelessness in some contexts—although there is no formal consensus as to the role SROs occupy on the housing continuum (Lekas et al., 2021).

SROs in Vancouver often implement legally grey policies (e.g., guest policies, curfews) that are differentially applied to PWUD to evict (Bardwell et al., 2018; Fleming et al., 2019). Recent research has demonstrated that Vancouver's eviction rates are the highest in Canada (Xuereb et al., 2021), and within this context SRO residents are especially vulnerable to eviction due to inadequate enforcement of, or explicit exclusion from, provincially mandated tenancy

protections (Fleming et al., 2019). While Vancouver maintains an international reputation for progressive approaches to housing and health among PWUD (e.g., overdose prevention sites, Housing First initiatives), widespread eviction, growing homelessness, and normalized brutalization of PWUD (e.g., over-policing, stigma, lack of services) point to the failures of current public policy approaches (Lopez, 2020). These issues are likely to increase in severity as the existing affordable housing stock is increasingly lost. Thus, it is critical to understand the larger role of evictions in producing harms across housing trajectories of PWUD.

Previous research has demonstrated that structurally vulnerable PWUD are often targeted for eviction due to drug use and associated vulnerabilities (e.g., overdose, violence), and that this intersects with social positionality on the basis of, for example, race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status to amplify risk of eviction (Collins et al., 2018; Mead et al., 2018; Robertson, 2007; Van Laere et al., 2009). In our recent study of socio-legal contexts of evictions (Fleming et al., 2019), we found that PWUD were not only targeted for eviction on the basis of their drug use, but that these evictions proliferated amidst gaps in tenancy protections that enabled landlords to act unlawfully when issuing notices of eviction (e.g. short-notice, not issuing written notice). Short notice, unlawful, and prejudicial evictions are common among structurally vulnerable urban populations (Desmond, 2012), and serve as a major barrier to securing new housing. This illustrates why eviction into homelessness is a well-documented phenomenon among PWUD and is symptomatic of larger structural failures within current approaches to affordable housing (Crane and Warnes, 2000; Desmond, 2012; Dickson-Gomez et al., 2008). This counters common narratives framing homelessness among PWUD as due to intrinsic characteristics then used to justify eviction (e.g., drug use, mental health), and frame PWUD as “hard to house” (Aubry et al., 2021; Crane and Warnes, 2000).

Amidst social-structural conditions that enable and incentivize displacement of PWUD (e.g., due to redevelopment, inadequate tenancy protections), homelessness has been linked to evictions (Collins et al., 2018; Fleming et al., 2019; Dickson-Gomez et al., 2008). Accordingly, housing vulnerability and homelessness can be understood through the lens of structural vulnerability, which seeks to understand how social suffering among certain groups results from their locations within social hierarchies and networks of power (Quesada et al., 2011). Structural vulnerability asserts that multiple intersecting oppressions (e.g., race, class, gender, ability) combine to produce differential health and social outcomes among, for example, PWUD (Rhodes et al., 2012). This focus on social-structural drivers has been useful in critiquing discourses of worthiness, stigma, and social exclusion that position PWUD as morally responsible for poor health and social outcomes, and operationalize deservingness within care systems (Lopez, 2020; Lopez et al., 2018); and in drawing attention to how agency is differentially produced and constrained across social locations (Mayer et al., 2020; McNeil et al., 2015). Consequently, while eviction has been associated with adverse outcomes such as violence, increased HIV viral load, and changes to drug use patterns, including increased stimulant use and risky injection practices (Damon et al., 2018; Kennedy et al., 2017a,b; McNeil et al., 2021), we can apply structural vulnerability to understand how these outcomes are produced by broader social-structural forces rather than individual behaviors alone (Rhodes et al., 2012). Our previous work investigating evictions (Collins et al., 2018; Fleming et al., 2019; McNeil et al., 2021) has utilized this lens to draw attention to how the interaction of structural (e.g., drug criminalization, poverty, gentrification) and social-cultural forces (e.g., anti-drug stigma, sexism)

produces vulnerability to eviction—and subsequent homelessness—and exacerbate drug-related harms by, for example, necessitating high-risk drug-use patterns (e.g., increased stimulant use, rushed injection) for survival. Given the potential for harm resulting from eviction, it is critical to better understand how this form of housing vulnerability is experienced within drug-using communities.

While homelessness has been associated with negative health and social outcomes such as drug-related risks and overdose (Davy-Mendez et al., 2021; Yamamoto et al., 2019), increased risk of morbidity and mortality (Milloy et al., 2012), reduced access to drug treatment (Upshur et al., 2018), and housing services (Wusinich et al., 2019), research documenting housing vulnerability has often focused on cumulative or episodic housing status (e.g., number of days of shelter- and street-based homelessness). In its attempt to quantify housing vulnerability this approach is limited in its capacity to understand how larger social-structural forces are implicated in experiences of homelessness, and may unwittingly perpetuate views that frame structural vulnerabilities as a result of individual pathologies. Scholars seeking to capture the range of settings and nuanced experiences among housing vulnerable groups have described traveling the “institutional circuit.” Hopper et al. (1997) first used this term to characterize the pattern of residential instability and transience of structurally vulnerable homeless persons as they cycle through a series of institutional settings (e.g., shelters, treatment centres, jails) and other non-institutional settings that indicate a higher degree of vulnerability (e.g., streets, friends’ or families’ homes). For example, one’s institutional circuit might consist of discharge from hospital to a shelter, then from a shelter to street-based homelessness, where one might be arrested and jailed, and so on. This term is thus better suited to capture the myriad patterns of residential instability experienced among housing vulnerable groups than traditional understandings of housing trajectories, which often emphasize a typology of paths of housing status and tenure over time (McAllister et al., 2011). This concept has since been applied in research focusing on trajectories of recently-incarcerated (Sered and Norton-Hawk, 2019) and homeless women (Cooper, 2015), women with mental illness (Luhmann, 2008), pregnant women who use drugs (Knight, 2015), and precariously housed individuals (Aubry et al., 2021) to demonstrate how social-structural inequities coalesce along the institutional circuit to prevent structurally vulnerable groups from achieving housing stability. The institutional circuit is thus a useful concept for examining wide-spread eviction of PWUD, particularly given the relationship between eviction and homelessness among this population.

Social safety nets targeted towards structurally vulnerable and drug-using communities often prioritize those considered to be most “in need” (Herring, 2019; Lopez, 2020), including housing programs that ascribe need based on housing status and setting (e.g., shelter-vs. street-based homelessness), and temporality (e.g., “chronic” homelessness), suggesting the needs of recently-evicted PWUD and frequent travellers of the institutional circuit may be neglected. Situated within a larger community-based research study investigating evictions among PWUD in the DTES, this paper explores the housing trajectories of recently-evicted PWUD through the framework of the institutional circuit, and seeks to understand how wider contexts of structural vulnerability shape experiences within the institutional circuit. Within this, we emphasize how the tensions between survival and control are implicated in wider patterns of residential instability to dynamically shape risks of health and social harms.

2. Methods

This study draws on semi-structured qualitative interviews with PWUD undertaken as part of a larger community-based participatory research project investigating the socio-legal contexts of residential evictions among PWUD in Vancouver's DTES neighbourhood, and their implications for health and social outcomes. This project emerged in the context of longstanding collaborations with a local drug user-led organization and a community legal group, through which we collectively identified widespread eviction in the DTES as a key community research priority. This project was co-developed with these groups, including development of research objectives, research design, and grant submission, and an advisory board comprised of members of this organization, pursuant to the meaningful involvement of PWUD in research in this heavily-researched community (Damon et al., 2017). Using a peer hiring model adapted from Closson et al. (2016), members of the drug user-led organization were hired as Peer Research Assistants (i.e., people with lived experience of drug use and within the DTES trained in research methods) to assist with a range of activities, including participant recruitment, data analysis, interpretation, and knowledge translation, as well as participate on the study advisory board. Community organizers and legal advocates were also consulted throughout the research process. Participants were recruited through outreach by Peer Research Assistants and referral from partnering drug user- and sex worker-led organizations. Participants were eligible for this study if they reported current illicit substance use (other than cannabis) and had been evicted from an SRO in the DTES in the past 60 days. Participants were interviewed at baseline (within 60 days of their most recent eviction) and again three to six months later. We aimed to oversample women who use drugs relative to their representation in the DTES, and have previously reported on gendered experiences of eviction (see Collins et al., 2018).

Data collection occurred from June 2015 through May 2016 at a storefront research office in the DTES. The research coordinator and a Peer Research Assistant conducted interviews with 56 PWUD at baseline, 41 of whom completed follow-up interviews (see Table 1). Interviews were facilitated using an interview guide co-developed with the study advisory board to ensure that key topics of community concern were addressed in this study. Baseline interviews focused on eviction contexts and immediate outcomes, and included a mapping exercise in which printed maps of the DTES were used to document recent changes to spatial patterns (e.g., access to services, housing trajectories). Go-along interviews (Carpiano, 2009) were completed with a subset of participants prior to their baseline qualitative interviews during the initial stages of data collection. A team member accompanied participants on a walk through the DTES to document neighbourhood locations central to their daily lives (e.g., drug scene locations, community services), which were further discussed during the baseline interviews. Although go-along interviews helped to contextualize participants' experience of the neighbourhood, we discontinued these interviews due to the considerable overlap between central locations among participants and concerns about the research burden placed on participants for data that could otherwise be collected through the mapping activity. Follow-up interviews focused on longer-term health and social impacts, access to housing, and referenced baseline maps to facilitate targeted discussion of post-eviction experiences. We have previously reported on the contexts of this sample's evictions (see Fleming et al., 2019). We originally aimed to map participants' housing trajectories—that is, to map the paths of specific settings stayed in and housing status over time—at follow up, but this proved challenging as they moved often and with such irregularity that it proved impossible to establish coherent timelines. Interviews lasted 30–60 min, were audio-recorded, and professionally transcribed verbatim. Participants were provided \$30 compensation after each interview for their

time. Written, informed consent was obtained prior to starting interviews, and re-affirmed prior to follow-up interviews. Participants were lost to follow-up due to factors such as displacement to other neighbourhoods or municipalities, changes to contact information, incarceration, and overdose-related death.

Analysis began, and continued throughout, data collection. Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo, a qualitative analysis software. TF, AC, and RM analyzed transcripts using deductive and inductive approaches (Bradley et al., 2007). A preliminary coding framework based on a priori categories was developed to facilitate analysis and provide structure to early coding. These a priori categories were informed by main topics in the interview guides, observations from the interviews, spatial data from the go-along interviews and mapping exercises, and extensive meetings with the study team, which included peer researchers and housing and drug policy legal experts. The study team regularly met to discuss the analysis and to revise the coding framework to include new emerging categories. Upon establishing final categories, transcripts were recoded to confirm validity of findings. The present analysis primarily draws on follow-up interviews. We drew on concepts of structural vulnerability (Quesada et al., 2011; Rhodes et al., 2012) and the institutional circuit (Hopper et al., 1997) in our interpretation of themes to better understand how participants' post-eviction patterns of residential cycling were framed by social-structural inequities. For our analysis of how eviction shapes specific drug-use practices among this participant population see McNeil et al. (2021). This study was approved by the Providence Health Care/University of British Columbia Research Ethics Board. Pseudonyms are used when identifying study participants to protect their identities.

3. Results

While unable to map post-eviction housing trajectories due to difficulties in establishing coherent timelines and movement patterns, our analysis uncovered how post-eviction trajectories were characterized by the institutional circuit of homelessness (Hopper et al., 1997). In brief, our participants' post-eviction institutional circuits mostly consisted of staying within kin-based networks (i.e., "couchsurfing" with friends or family), local emergency shelters, and street-based homelessness (i.e., "rough sleeping"). The majority of participants reported periods of rough sleeping following their eviction—something possible in Vancouver due to the mild climate that allows for greater capacity to survive outside.

Our findings reflect the key themes relating to how participants navigated the institutional circuit across these settings: (1) the act of traveling the institutional circuit, including the frequency with which participants moved through different settings; (2) participants' survival strategies within the institutional circuit, and how these interfaced with structural vulnerabilities; (3) how participants' social networks could facilitate survival and stability; and (4) mechanisms by which participants negotiated agency within a context characterized by loss of autonomy.

3.1 Traveling the institutional circuit post-eviction

When viewed through an institutional circuit lens, participant narratives revealed a spectrum of precarity within experiences of homelessness not captured by common

understandings of housing vulnerability. This stemmed from the frequency with which spaces participants occupied within the framework of the institutional circuit (e.g., shelters, street-based homelessness), as well as the physical spaces occupied (e.g., specific buildings, neighbourhoods), changed. ‘Kenneth,’ a 41-year-old Indigenous man, described having to “move around a lot” following his eviction:

K: I slept maybe 30 days [total] in shelters maybe.

I: And then how many days would you say roughly in your sister’s place?

K: Almost a month maybe.

I: And how many nights sleepless or on the street?

K: Probably another month or something like that.

Here, Kenneth was asked about the cumulative, rather than continuous, time in these spaces, as he was only able to spend a short period of time—sometimes only a night—in each space before having to seek nightly shelter elsewhere. This was echoed by many others when describing their post-eviction trajectories, including ‘Keith,’ a 48-year-old white man who remained unhoused at follow up: “I move constantly... Pretty much every night a different spot.” This highlights the volatility of the institutional circuit, in that participants’ positions could change on a daily basis. Participants attributed this volatility to social-structural forces, including access to shelter through kin-based networks; availability of emergency shelters and acceptability of shelter policies (e.g., abstinence-based, curfews); suitability of weather for outdoor camping; visibility and exposure to police or private security guards; and risk of interpersonal violence.

Many participants attributed feelings of isolation, frustration, and hopelessness to their frequent cycling between settings. For example, ‘Angela,’ a 43-year-old white woman who had cycled between shelters, her friend’s SRO, and the streets, described how she felt about moving so frequently:

Sort of lost; very [lost], mind you, because I have no housing it’s caused most of my sense of hopelessness, as well as depression, in my life. It’s added mostly to that, those factors, and those factors of not necessarily feeling somewhat stable or happy.

‘Freddie,’ a 49-year-old white man who had cycled between shelters and the streets, similarly expressed, “It’s no foundation, there’s no stabilization, there is no fuck all. You’re just scattered; you’ve got no focus... I’m totally fucking tired, burnt out.” Angela and Freddie’s words emphasize the importance of, and desire for, the stability of secure housing among our participants, yet also acknowledge how this stability is not achievable within the institutional circuit. This was particularly striking among participants for whom the loss of stability and structure was acutely felt due to unlawful and short-notice evictions from marginal housing—sometimes in a matter of days (see Fleming et al., 2019).

While many had previous experiences of homelessness which had normalized the institutional circuit as characteristic of their structural vulnerability, participants acknowledged that being suddenly homeless after a period in which they were housed was “different,” and that they had to re-learn how to be homeless (e.g., navigating survival strategies or shifting social

dynamics; increased surveillance; changing daily routines). 'Keith' likened his experience to returning to work after extended time off:

Say you were in a job doing a certain type of a thing and then, you know, you went to another job doing something different for a year, and then went back to your old job, you know. Or you went back to your old job for a different company. So then, you know, the new company, even though you know all the ins and outs, they still like it done their way. Right? They want it done their way. Not the way you were doing it for that company or the way you were doing it; the way we want you to do it.

'Renee,' a 50-year-old Indigenous woman, had previously spent a significant amount of time unhoused, although her arthritis and other health conditions limited her ability to apply those previous experiences to her current one: I was homeless for almost nine years... but back then it was fun. And I was younger, right? But now I'm older and I got more health problems now, right? So, it makes it harder to be homeless. This highlights how changes in age and ability—in addition to shifting the social-structural dynamics in the city—could require participants to reorient themselves to navigating daily life while homeless relative to previous experiences.

3.2. Meeting survival needs

The demands imposed by the institutional circuit impacted participants' survival strategies, as the extreme instability characterizing post-eviction experiences necessitated that participants attend to only their most immediate survival needs—namely, securing nightly shelter. Within the context of an overburdened shelter system, participants were required to structure their entire days around what were characterized as prohibitively complicated shelter intake processes, with no guarantee of a space. While shelter intake processes are intended to be low-barrier, participant experiences highlight how they could further marginalize homeless individuals and foreground their vulnerabilities, as 'Jason,' a 41-year-old Black man, described:

You have to be there at the time they request people to come back. Like, for example for [shelter name], you have to call in at 5 a.m. to get on the list and then you check on them at 11 p.m. That's when they start taking people inside...They take only the first 10 at [shelter name]. So, one time I was number 11. So, when they say they don't have a bed, they don't have a bed and you can't be arguing with them. So, now, it's 11 p.m. and I don't have a bed. So, I have to come back downtown, down to the Downtown Eastside, you know?

This participant is referring to a shelter outside of the DTES, though he reported returning to the DTES for rough sleeping as it was perceived as a better area to spend the night outside than other neighbourhoods. While the DTES has a higher concentration of rough sleepers, drug sellers, and services operating through the night that may address select survival needs (e.g., drug use, social networks), participants reported an accompanying vulnerability to harm related to increased risk of violence and theft, sexual assault, harassment from law enforcement, and sleeplessness.

Other participants reported similar tensions as they negotiated survival strategies which may simultaneously mitigate and increase vulnerabilities, including increasing drug use—usually crystal methamphetamine—to remain sleepless to protect against theft and violence (see McNeil

et al., 2021); restricting movement and services accessed to better secure belongings; and staying in less visible spaces to avoid street evictions and drug criminalization. This was described by Angela, whose experiences negotiating nightly shelter underscore our participants' precarity and highlight how housing vulnerability and vulnerability to sexual violence are intimately connected for structurally vulnerable women and gender non-conforming individuals:

I underwent severe sexual assaults after my eviction, mind you, forced to commit sexual acts under the pretense that I would have somewhere to stay at night. [I was] put in situations where the advantages are weighed in the other's favour as far as not having the proper safe housing to go to.

Importantly, securing belongings emerged as a key survival concern among participants, one which could have devastating consequences when not met. Participants characterized their personal belongings, including items recovered from their former housing, as critical to income generation (e.g., reselling), physical safety (e.g., ability to camp, keep warm), and emotional security (e.g., past and future homes). As such, how participants navigated the institutional circuit was often dictated by their belongings, including movement patterns, which shelters they accessed, where they camped, drug use patterns, etc. 'Miranda,' a 31-year-old white woman who was camping outside in the DTES with her partner and re-sold goods at a local open-air market, explained how her daily survival was shaped around her vulnerability to sanctioned property destruction by police and city workers via "street sweeps:"

Every morning, because the police would come and do their sweep with the city guys, if I had any merch you had it packed up and you moved...we had to be up early, and if we were smart we had the majority of our stuff packed up the night before, before we fell asleep. Because sometime between 7:30[am] and 9:00, the city workers and the police would come and do their morning cleanup sweep. So you had to be off the block. You couldn't have a shopping cart, because it was considered stolen property. If you did, they would take everything in it and it went on the back of the truck, and you had no say. It was just gone.

Miranda's immediate survival—in this case, ability to generate income—was quite literally dependent on her belongings, making the security of her cart tantamount to the security of her person, and demonstrating why participants foregrounded personal possessions in their institutional circuits. Other participants similarly articulated how central these considerations were. For example, Renee reported that her need to always carry her belongings with her restricted movement such that she was unable to adhere to strict shelter intake processes, and also necessitated her using "about twice as much [crystal methamphetamine] just to stay awake" at night to avoid theft: "You've got to worry about your belongings getting stolen while you're sleeping, so pretty much you've just got to stay up." Her experience illustrates how the importance of material possessions might eclipse that of other, more commonly regarded survival needs (e.g., shelter, food). While normative expectations of homeless individuals might view our participants' survival strategies (e.g., increased methamphetamine use to stay awake, restricting movement and services accessed to secure belongings) as irrational or indicative of an underlying pathology, accounts demonstrate how these strategies are produced in response to broader structural vulnerabilities, thus underscoring how current understandings of homelessness do not necessarily work within the bounds of our participants' lived experience.

3.3. Seeking stability within social networks

While participant accounts characterized shelter and street-based settings as spaces of structural and everyday violence, friends' and families' homes were viewed not only as spaces to meet survival needs, but where they could also receive essential care and stability within the institutional circuit. Couchsurfing was reported to provide access to amenities and safe spaces to use drugs with others amidst an unfolding overdose crisis, and these relationships helped some participants feel more 'at-home.' This was expressed by Angela, who had stayed with a friend in his SRO "under the radar" since her eviction:

I go there to take a shower, take a bath, eat, sleep, talk, do drugs, things like that; It's nice just being able to visit someone and at the end of the night they just sort of let you crash or whatever. [...] He [friend] had no issue with it. It was just the landlord that decided to threaten him with possible eviction.

Angela's account highlights the vital material and social care that couchsurfing facilitated for participants, although it was not without risk and exposed friends and family to potential harm. Those in participants' social networks were structurally vulnerable PWUD who themselves experienced a high degree of housing precarity, underscoring how seeking support through these networks may deepen experiences of vulnerability for both parties due to highly regulated operational contexts (e.g., strict building rules) and the implicit threat of punishment (e.g., eviction). In this way, the structural vulnerability inherent in participants' social networks could preclude them from receiving community care and establishing some order of stability within their networks.

Social dynamics between participants and hosts were also cited as factors impacting ability to couchsurf, including feelings of overstaying one's welcome, interpersonal conflict, and as 'Bill' (59-year-old white man) notes, other guests taking precedence: "If my friend has company, I have to leave. I end up outside; hopefully it's not raining." Within the context of couchsurfing, SROs were experienced as an institutional setting akin to emergency shelters, where participants were subject to specific rules and building policies and were at risk of sudden expulsion from these spaces. Thus, even as couchsurfing appeared to offer temporary stability within participants' institutional circuits, the structural pressures stemming from their housing vulnerability rendered participants and their social networks vulnerable to harm, and further underscored housing and structural vulnerabilities.

3.4. Negotiating agency

While the volatility of the institutional circuit often rendered participants subject to social-structural forces beyond their control, accounts demonstrated how mobility was a key mechanism through which our participants negotiated agency. This was evident when participants contrasted their experiences staying in different settings and how this shaped their preferred paths of the institutional circuit, with many participants asserting that it was their choice to stay outside since their eviction. For Keith, who remained unhoused at follow-up, rough sleeping was viewed as providing greater freedom—both in terms of mobility but also in the avoidance of the strict rules characterizing shelters and other housing environments. Keith stressed that he was able to stay "wherever I want," reporting that he felt healthier when outside and enjoyed being in nature:

Most of the times I'm pushing a [shopping] cart around, and I go out to North Van or Kits or whatever, and I take a cart out there, and I hit the hills. And sometimes I've got two of them, you know, going around pushing and pulling around anywhere from 150 to 350 pounds. Everywhere I go. So if I'm not biking, then I'm pushing a cart... I wake up to trees, grass, birds, and dogs running around in the park around me. What's wrong with that, you know?

He positioned this in opposition to indoor environments, in which the reportedly chaotic social environments and widespread social-structural control (e.g., surveillance, curfews) was akin to carceral control: “[Staff are] checking room to room, like cell to cell... it's just an institution with a different institutional feel... that's one of the reasons I don't go into the buildings.” Later in his interview, Keith described how police and city workers had destroyed his cart and belongings on multiple occasions, as well as the chronic pain that he attributed to constantly hauling around his belongings and that had begun to impact his mobility. Still, Keith claimed the decision to stay outside as his own, using his reported enjoyment of rough sleeping as a way to claim agency over his situation rather than an obstinate refusal to benefit from available welfare institutions, and reimagining a survival strategy as a lifestyle choice. Other participants similarly expressed a preference for—and for some, enjoyment of—rough sleeping amongst the limited options available to them, while simultaneously acknowledging how their structural vulnerability framed this experience, thus asserting a sense of control over their circumstances.

For others, preferences for staying outside were grounded in perceptions of shelters and SROs as spaces in which PWUD are subject to extreme forms of socio-spatial regulation in the form of, for example, heavy surveillance and seemingly unfair policies similar to those in housing they had been evicted from; shelters and SROs were “fucking depressing.” While shelters and SROs may mitigate some of our participants' vulnerabilities (e.g., poor weather, theft, police harassment, mobility challenges), as Kenneth notes, the social-structural contexts of these spaces also constrained agency: “It's too controlled! I want to be outside. I'd rather be outside and independent.” Here, Kenneth highlights the importance of autonomy (i.e., self-determination) in participants' institutional circuits. Narratives revealed that, post-eviction, PWUD were largely denied agency and looked to assert agency via voluntary movement, which many participants viewed as more achievable while rough sleeping.

In addition to perceived degree of choice in actual movements, when positioned in opposition to characterizations of shelters and SROs, inhabiting outdoor spaces was a way to actively resist the social-structural forces in environments characterized as oppressive—even though participants were still subjected to power relations vis-a-vis, for example, street sweeps and policing. However, as described by ‘Michael,’ a 57-year-old Latino man, participants could use their knowledge of the DTES and surrounding areas to further resist those power structures imposed upon outdoor spaces:

M: Normally, I got my hide house [i.e., secret outdoor spot]. Eh, you got to learn that way, man. Someday I am going to give you a tour, you know what I mean? You got a place and you know those places, right? And when you go in, you make sure nobody is watching you.

I: So, you got a few places?

M: Of course I have.

I: Can you share? Are they just in the [DTES]?

M: Not in [the DTES]. But, [local park], I have a place down in their bluff, you know, it's just myself. It's a very safe, you know?

Among this group of participants, factors such as poor weather, theft, and police harassment were cited as eventually forcing them to move or to seek indoor shelter against their wishes. Thus, participants subverted expectations that PWUD experiencing homelessness are reliant on, and should be grateful for, emergency shelter spaces that were often framed by participants as unsuitable or experienced as oppressive.

However, this trade-off between the control of shelters and SROs, and the autonomy viewed to be offered outdoors was not the same for all participants. Some exhibited preferences for indoor spaces and accepted the control of those spaces in favour of perceived benefits, highlighting an inability to assert agency against more practical, survival-based considerations; although prior negative experiences or ingrained stigma against rough sleeping—both of which were demonstrated amongst our participants—may have rendered indoor spaces as the only reasonable option for some. Importantly, some women in particular tended to prefer shelters and SROs, likely out of concerns related to vulnerability to harm in street-based settings and reported positive experiences in shelters that reaffirmed them as a preference.

4. Discussion

Our findings demonstrate how, against a backdrop of prejudicial and unlawful evictions, eviction from SRO housing directly led to experiences of homelessness, and (re-)entrenched structurally vulnerable PWUD in the patterns of residential instability and transience that constitute the institutional circuit. Couchsurfing with family or friends was characterized as a way to stabilize oneself seemingly outside of the institutional circuit, but was fraught and could paradoxically increase housing vulnerability for others. Shelters were reported to be heavily overburdened, with participants routinely unable to secure shelter space due to lack of available beds. Similar to couchsurfing in SROs, shelters were framed as spaces of structural (e.g., oppressive policies) and everyday violence (e.g., normalized interpersonal violence). Further, our findings highlight how competing survival needs and constructions of agency shape post-eviction housing experiences to subject PWUD to daily tensions and trade-offs that may simultaneously mitigate and increase risks of harm. These results draw attention to the ways the institutional circuit interacts with structural vulnerabilities among drug-using populations following eviction to reinforce patterns of vulnerability that can undermine attempts to exit homelessness.

In this study, the transition from relative housing stability to homelessness following eviction was normalized as a function of the social position of structurally vulnerable PWUD. This builds on previous research demonstrating that the institutional circuit is viewed as an expected outcome of structural vulnerability (DeVerteuil, 2003; Hopper et al., 1997; Knight, 2015), and can be situated within the wider contexts of violence and suffering that are normalized and legitimized in the everyday lives of PWUD (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004). The demands of the institutional circuit, chiefly that of frequent mobility and remaining in a persistent state of instability, ensured

that participants focused only on immediate needs, undermining future housing stability. Here, specific settings promoted residential cycling through social-structural mechanisms (e.g., street sweeps, shelter curfews) that amplified structural vulnerabilities (e.g., criminalized drug use, poverty) and strengthened the wider institutional circuit. Similar to our findings, DeVerteuil (2003) previously discussed how this pattern reinforces itself over time to make residential stability a progressively less likely outcome. Sered and Norton-Hawk (2019) documented similar findings over a longitudinal period with homeless and unstably housed recently-incarcerated women, in which the majority of women spent most of the 9-year study period in the institutional circuit. In our context, this suggests a pessimistic outcome for recently-evicted PWUD without urgently needed structural intervention, such as ending street sweeps and implementing safe supply, which evidence suggests to support stability among structurally vulnerable PWUD (Olding et al., 2020; Ivsins et al., 2021). Our findings then add to existing literature to further evidence the durability of the institutional circuit. Given this, and the normalization of cycles of eviction and homelessness among our participants, our findings also suggest that marginal housing environments (e.g., SROs) be reconceptualized as a stop on the institutional circuit, rather than a temporary break. This may offer a more fulsome understanding of experiences of homelessness and housing vulnerability to future researchers.

Our findings highlight the tensions participants navigated as they reconciled survival needs, emphasizing factors that differentially threatened (e.g., violence, law enforcement, weather, sexual violence) and promoted (e.g., drug use, care, secure belongings) immediate survival across different settings. Past research has similarly documented how homeless PWUD reconcile various social-structural forces and navigate risk to negotiate nightly shelter within specific forms of housing vulnerability (e.g., shelter waits, avoiding street sweeps, SRO policies) (Knight, 2015; Cooper, 2015; Langedegger and Koester, 2016). Shelters are one setting within the institutional circuit that are expressly intended to meet immediate survival needs of vulnerably housed individuals and yet paradoxically undermined these needs through operational policies (e.g., wait times, bed shortages) that challenged participants' abilities to meet other basic needs (e.g., income generation). This discourages shelter access, highlighting a phenomenon wherein structurally vulnerable PWUD might refuse needed supports due to operational contexts that do not meet their needs and potentially increase risks of harm (Knight, 2015; Fleming et al., 2019; Herring, 2019). Within the context of the wider institutional circuit, Cooper (2015) has similarly discussed how competing "institutional timetables" pattern homeless individuals' daily lives, causing them to prioritize "getting by rather than getting out" (p. 173). Participants additionally tied security of belongings to daily survival, as possessions provide nightly shelter (e.g., tents), income (e.g., reselling), and emotional security. Participants at times prioritized belongings over more "basic" needs and adjusted survival strategies (e.g., increased methamphetamine use, mobility patterns) in consideration of them (Langedegger and Koester, 2016; McNeil et al., 2021). This highlights how this particular need is unaddressed in current service contexts (e.g., lack of storage options) and threatened by sanctioned property destruction. There is a need for policy and programmatic interventions that mitigate the paradoxical risks of negotiating daily survival to better promote long-term survival, including addressing the social-structural contexts undermining survival in specific settings (e.g., building curfews, street sweeps).

PWUD resisted spaces of control as a way to reclaim agency and reject normalization of socio-spatial control of homelessness. Within a highly constrained residential context, participants used mobility to assert autonomy over their institutional circuits (e.g., choice in where to stay), accepting risks of harm to maintain a sense of control over environments that are uncontrollable to them. This may imply that autonomy was leveraged as a coping mechanism. In outdoor settings, ability to assert choice over mobility, including where to camp, has been implicated in the material well-being of unhoused individuals (DeVerteuil, 2003; Langeegger and Koester, 2016). This draws further attention to the harms perpetuated by current practices of socio-spatial control (e.g., street sweeps) of vulnerably housed PWUD (McNeil et al., 2015). However, considerations around autonomy were primarily seen in preferences for rough sleeping over oppressive indoor spaces. While this defied the rational logics of public health, it was unsurprising given the literature highlighting how spaces intended to house or shelter structurally vulnerable PWUD differentially limit agency through social control mechanisms (e.g., surveillance, drug prohibition) that then produce risks of harm (Knight et al., 2014; Boyd et al., 2016; Lazarus et al., 2011). Further, the wider social-structural contexts of the institutional circuit framed how PWUD engage with these spaces and with the city itself (e.g., rough sleeping outside) to create them as sites of simultaneous resistance (e.g., of control within shelters) and oppression (e.g., vulnerability to street sweeps) (de Certeau, 1980). This highlights a relationality wherein agency is constructed through ongoing and reciprocal action between individuals and their environments (Rhodes et al., 2012). Where agency is constrained by structural vulnerability, it is also produced through participant practices in response to those same vulnerabilities. This allows us to reframe actions that may not typically be viewed as agentic under a neoliberal subjectivity as the outcome of rational decision-making (Moore and Fraser, 2006). In our study context, the attention to claims of agency was especially significant given the extreme loss of control that eviction represents and the pervasive expectation that unhoused PWUD surrender remaining autonomy to shelter environments that can be more oppressive than their former SROs. Similar to our findings, previous research has demonstrated how preferences and patterns within the institutional circuit are often positioned in opposition to the social-structural control characteristic of shelters (Herring, 2019) and certain housing environments (Luhmann, 2008). However, preserving autonomy by rejecting these resources may deepen vulnerabilities, illustrating how PWUD may continue to act in “irrational” ways in order to reclaim control against a context of disempowerment (Bartoszeko, 2019; Cooper, 2015). Future research and solutions oriented towards housing vulnerability among drug-using populations should prioritize responses that seek to support and preserve autonomy as it is understood by PWUD.

While recently homeless persons are often considered less in need of housing assistance (Herring, 2019), this work characterizing the experiences of recently-evicted PWUD highlights the specific needs of this group to demonstrate the urgent need for interventions that aim to interrupt the institutional circuit within structurally vulnerable drug-using communities. Current solutions often suggest an individualized view of homelessness, with approaches such as Housing First employing vulnerability assessment tools (VAT) to operationalize deservingness (Mitchell, 2020). Recent work by Lopez (2020) discusses more broadly how state care individualizes PWUD’s structural vulnerability to determine who is most deserving of care by moral standards. Applying this, we can see how institutional ascriptions of responsibility may render recently-evicted PWUD as “underserving” of housing intervention until judged to be acceptable by a VAT. Arguments for

greater access to voluntary psychiatric care and drug treatment as a means to break the institutional circuit further draw on individualized and medicalized understandings of homelessness (Daly et al., 2018; Luhrmann, 2008). However, past research has found access to resources such as subsidized housing to be a stronger predictor of future housing stability among homeless and housing vulnerable persons than have mental health and substance use (Aubry et al., 2021). Thus, while support for harm reduction, treatment services, and mental health are needed, this is separate from interventions that explicitly target housing vulnerability and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the broader social-structural conditions (e.g., poverty, housing affordability) that entrap recently-evicted PWUD in the institutional circuit.

Importantly, while more immediate short-term and emergency shelter options are required, shelters are not meant to secure permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness, and in fact may work against this goal, as discussed by Marr (2015) and Wusinich et al. (2019). Thus, anything short of more permanent non-market housing units must not be viewed as an adequate solution to affordable housing shortages and homelessness. Further upstream, eviction prevention must be adopted as a critical public health strategy to better protect against the health and social harms resulting from residential eviction among drug-using communities (Holl et al., 2016; Fleming et al., 2019).

This study has several limitations. Findings are specific to PWUD evicted from, and who were residing in, the DTES neighbourhood, which represents a greater concentration of health and social services targeted towards drug use and housing vulnerability than likely found in other areas across the region. Therefore, findings may not reflect post-eviction experiences of PWUD in other contexts. Further research should consider how different community environments within the same jurisdictions impact post-eviction experiences of PWUD. Our sample did not include other actors relevant to housing and homelessness in Vancouver, such as housing operators, landlords, and housing outreach workers, and therefore may not provide a complete account of the housing landscapes recently evicted PWUD must navigate. Data were collected in 2015 and 2016 and may not necessarily reflect current post-eviction experiences of PWUD. However, recent mass eviction and displacement events within the DTES suggest that the dynamics observed within our study continue to be relevant and may have even intensified (Gurstein, 2022). Additionally, transgender, non-binary, and Two Spirit PWUD, who experience unique housing vulnerabilities related to these identities, were underrepresented in this study relative to their overrepresentation among vulnerably housed persons (Fraser et al., 2019). Peer-based recruitment models have been implicated in more homogenous samples (Souleymanov et al., 2016), suggesting a limitation in our recruitment strategy that was not adequately addressed by participant referrals from local drug- and sex-worker led organizations. Additionally, applying Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic violence in research encounters prompts us to consider how even within community-based approaches, research interviews are situated within the context of power relations that differentially impact research participation among gender and sexual minority PWUD (Bourdieu, 1984, cited in Farrugia, 2012). Future research specific to post-eviction experiences of gender and sexual minority PWUD is needed, and should account for the power relations inherent in this specific research relationship so as to minimize the risk of underscoring the symbolic violence experienced by gender and sexual minority PWUD.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, our study demonstrates the tensions that recently-evicted PWUD must navigate daily with regards to immediate survival needs, and how the “rational logic” of support services (e.g., shelters) functions to constrain agency in ways that do not necessarily align with lived realities on the institutional circuit. Understanding the institutional circuits of recently-evicted PWUD and situating these experiences within wider contexts of structural vulnerability is necessary to support social-structural interventions that advance housing stability among groups who are not prioritized by traditional assessments of housing need, particularly within a context of widespread eviction.

Credit author statement

TF: Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft; ABC: Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing; JB: Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing; KRK: writing – reviewing and editing; RM: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Table 1
Participant characteristics.

	Baseline (n = 56)	Follow-up (n = 41)
Age		
Mean	43.5	–
Range	24–67	–
Gender		
Men	35 (63%)	25 (61%)
Women	18 (32%)	13 (32%)
Transgender, Two Spirit ^a , or non-binary	3 (5%)	3 (7%)
Ethnicity		
White	29 (52%)	21 (51%)
Indigenous	21 (38%)	16 (39%)
Other	5 (9%)	4 (10%)
Drug of choice		
Heroin	18 (32%)	12 (29%)
Crack cocaine	8 (14%)	4 (10%)
Crystal methamphetamine	10 (18%)	6 (15%)
Other	10 (18%)	17 (41%)
Frequency of drug use		
Daily	42 (75%)	25 (61%)
3–4 times per week	5 (9%)	5 (12%)
≤1 time per week	9 (16%)	8 (20%)
Evictions in past 5 years		
No evictions	1 (2%)	–
1 eviction	24 (43%)	–
2–3 evictions	23 (41%)	–
≥4 evictions	8 (14%)	–
Evicted into homelessness	47 (84%)	–
Secured new housing	–	16 (39%)
Places stayed since eviction		
Unsheltered/outside	–	28 (68%)
Emergency shelter	–	23 (56%)
Friend’s place	–	23 (56%)

^a Two Spirit refers to Indigenous persons with masculine and feminine spirits (Lyons et al., 2016).