Living Through the Chaos: Rethinking Ecological Dimensions of Suicide with Young Women and Femmes Facing Housing Injustice

by Nicole Santos Dunn and Jeffrey Ansloos

Abstract: Suicidality among young women and femmes facing housing injustice is an urgent yet under-explored public health issue in Canada. This study highlights the invisibility of "hidden homelessness" and moves beyond individual risk factors to examine how structural, relational, and political forces shape distress. Using narrative inquiry and life history methods, the research identifies four key themes: 1. When a Non-No is a Yes, 2. Unsavoury People and Other Ruptures, 3. Inconsistency and Bouncing Around, and 4. Organized Abandonment and Chaos, Chaos, Chaos, Chaos. These themes elucidate the intersections of gendered violence, systemic neglect, and organized abandonment in shaping suicide risk and survival strategies. The study advocates for justice-oriented, non-coercive approaches to suicide prevention, and emphasizes relational trust and policies that address housing injustice. Strengths, limitations, and future research directions are also discussed.

Keywords: housing injustice; youthhood; suicide prevention; women; girls; femmes

Résumé : Les tendances suicidaires, chez les jeunes femmes et fems qui subissent une injustice concernant leur logement, constituent une question urgente de santé publique au Canada, ayant cependant fait l'objet de peu d'études. Cette étude met en évidence l'invisibilité de « l'itinérance cachée » et va au-delà des facteurs de risque individuels pour examiner comment les forces structurelles, relationnelles et politiques façonnent la détresse. Ayant recours à la méthodologie de l'enquête narrative et des histoires de vie, cette étude détermine quatre thèmes clés : 1. Quand qui ne dit mot consent; 2. Personnes peu recommandables et autres ruptures; 3. Inconstance et se faire trimbaler dans tous les sens; 4. L'abandon organisé et du chaos, encore du chaos et toujours plus de chaos. Ces thèmes élucident l'entrecroisement de la violence fondée sur le genre, de la négligence systémique et de l'abandon organisé ainsi que son incidence sur le risque de suicide et les stratégies de survie. Cette étude revendique des approches non coercitives et axées sur la justice en matière de prévention du suicide et met en évidence les relations de confiance et les politiques qui s'attaquent à l'injustice relative au logement. Les forces, les limites et de futurs axes de recherche sont également abordés.

Mots clés : injustice relative au logement, jeunesse, prévention du suicide, femmes, filles, fem

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Introduction

Suicidality and Gender in Context

Suicidality among young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice is an under-explored and urgent issue within public health (Eynan et al. 2002; Schwan 2020; Smith et al. 2007). In this study, suicidality refers to ideation or intent to die and is differentiated from non-suicidal self-injury. "Young" or "youth" refers to individuals whose age falls between 13 and 24 which is the Canadian Observatory on Youth Homelessness' age bracket for youth homelessness. However, we wish to recognize that there are tensions around how youthhood is defined. For example, is youthhood a developmental category or structural one? (Yang and Tuck, 2014). "Women" and "femmes" refers to individuals whose gender identity or expression aligns with femininity, whether they are cisgender, transgender, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming. The term "femme" encompasses a broad spectrum of gender identities that express femininity, often existing outside gender binaries. This distinction is crucial because femininity, particularly when expressed by those seen as violating traditional gender norms, invites intensified forms of misogyny, transmisogyny, and structural violence. These experiences, compounded by intersecting factors like race, class, and housing status, contribute to what is often called "hidden homelessness."

This study seeks to move beyond predominant, individualistic understandings of suicidality, recognizing that distress is not a private issue but one shaped by what we term *ecological dimensions*—the interlocking social, political, spatial, and affective forces that contour the lives of young women and femmes. While existing literature on youth suicide prevention tends to emphasize individual risk and protective factors (Flores et al. 2022; Fraser et al. 2015; Molock et al. 2021; Wallace et al. 2024; Walsh and Eggert 2007), such approaches often overlook the deeper systems of exclusion and violence that structure vulnerability. In contrast, we centre the lived experiences of young women and femmes to explore how gendered, racialized, and economic marginalization—in concert with housing injustice—gives rise to distress, while also shaping practices of survival and resistance. This ecological orientation aligns with calls to reimagine possibilities for care, solidarity, and justice within suicide research (White 2017).

Hidden Homelessness and Its Mental Health Impacts

In Canada, it is estimated that on any given night, 7,000 young people aged 13–24 are without stable shelter, with 36.4% identifying as female and 60% reporting at least one suicide attempt (Gaetz et al. 2016; Schwan et al. 2020). Many fall into the category of hidden homelessness—precarious living situations such as couch surfing, sleeping in cars, or exchanging work for shelter (Schwan et al. 2020). These invisible housing arrangements elude conventional definitions of homelessness and are often overlooked by public health measures, rendering the distress experienced by young women and femmes statistically and politically invisible. As Schwan et al. (2020) emphasize, hidden homelessness is "largely immeasurable" within traditional public health frameworks that fail to account for informal, unstable, and frequently unsafe spatial arrangements. This invisibility is not simply a matter of measurement, but part of a broader ecology of neglect where material conditions of instability, affective dislocation, and institutional abandonment converge. The young women and femmes at the center of this study are navigating not only housing insecurity but also the compounding effects of psychological distress, often without reliable access to care. These interwoven spatial, social, and affective ecologies structure both their suicidality and survival. By attending to these hidden experiences, this study seeks to make visible the entangled systems of harm that shape the lives and life chances of young women and femmes on the margins of public concern.

Limitations of Existing Youth Suicide Research

Mainstream research on youth suicide is predominantly quantitative, relying on biomedical frameworks that treat suicidality as an individual pathology (Hjelmeland 2016). While these approaches have provided important insights into behavioural trends, they often fail to consider how broader social, political, and ecological conditions—such as misogyny, poverty, and housing injustice—create and exacerbate distress. These structural forces not only intensify immediate crises but also limit young women's and femmes' ability to envision futures beyond mere survival. As Hjelmeland and Knizek (2010) argue, a deeper understanding of suicide requires accounting for the social, political, cultural, structural, and environmental contexts that shape everyday life.

Contemporary approaches to understanding youth suicide have begun to consider factors such as exposure to violence and bullying (Peter, Roberts and Buzdugan 2008), abuse and victimization (Flach and Razza 2021), the availability of material supports (Gauvin et al. 2019), and the importance of secure attachments and social supports that validate worth (Labelle et al. 2021) as relevant to suicidality. Yet, even in these more holistic accounts, such factors are often presented as discrete influences rather than as interwoven within complex, relational, and spatial ecologies. These ecologies are not only structural but also affective—shaped by dislocation, instability, and abandonment—and they form the broader terrain in which suicidality emerges.

Our research responds to Hjelmeland and Knizek's (2010) call, moving beyond individualistic and biomedical models to offer a more textured understanding of suicide. By grounding our analysis in the lived experiences of young women and femmes, we aim to highlight how their suicidality is deeply intertwined with the structural conditions of exclusion, violence, and instability they face daily. Their stories show that suicidality is not merely a personal crisis but a reflection of the ecological dimensions of structural violence–manifesting in the spatial, relational, and emotional realities of lives shaped by systems that routinely fail to meet their needs for safety, shelter, and care.

Towards a Critical Suicidology

The emerging field of Critical Suicide Studies offers a framework for rethinking how we approach suicidality. This field challenges the prevailing focus on quantification, medicalization, and individualization in suicide research, pushing instead for a broader exploration of the socio-political contexts that shape distress (White 2017). Critical approaches disrupt dominant frameworks by prioritizing lived experience and focusing on the ways structural inequalities produce and exacerbate suicidal distress. Our study aligns with this critical turn, focusing on how suicidality among young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice is not an isolated pathology but a symptom of structural violence and abandonment.

In centering the voices of these young women and femmes, we aim to decenter traditional forms of expertise that often dominate suicide research. Narrative inquiry allows us to foreground their lived experiences, acknowledging the ways in which their distress is shaped by complex and intersecting systems of power. By doing so, we push against psychocentric approaches that depoliticize suicidality, positioning it instead as a socio-political phenomenon that reflects broader patterns of exclusion and marginalization.

As White advocates, there is a need for suicide research to be "more diverse and creative, less psychocentric and less depoliticized" (White 2017, 472). Our approach to this research follows that call, using narrative inquiry to explore not only the ecological dimensions of distress but also how young women and femmes navigate survival, and how they imagine and reimagine futures in a world that routinely denies them the resources needed to thrive. This rethinking of suicidality urges us to move away from seeing these young women and femmes as passive recipients of care and instead recognize their agency in navigating systems of oppression while seeking spaces of possibility and survival.

Through the stories of young women and femmes, we explore the ways they resist, challenge, and endure in the face of overwhelming structural violence. Their suicidality cannot be understood in isolation from the socio-political contexts in which they live—contexts marked by misogyny, transmisogyny, poverty, and housing injustice. As they navigate these overlapping forces, they demonstrate strength, carving out spaces of survival where few resources exist. By centering their voices, we not only gain a deeper understanding of suicidality as a socio-political issue but also begin to reimagine what care, solidarity, and justice might look like for young women and femmes on the margins.

Methodology & Method

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a social constructionist framework, emphasizing that meaning is created through social interactions rather than discovered as a fixed truth (Chen et al. 2011). Unlike positivist traditions that prioritize objectivity, social constructionism privileges the knowledge generated from lived experience, especially within marginalized groups. Hoshmand (2005) notes that this approach values "tacit knowing," which helps to understand how individuals navigate structural inequalities. For young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice, the search for meaning in their lives cannot be reduced to individual pathology or risk. Instead, it must be understood as emerging from ecologies of dispossession and of care—networks of social, political, cultural, and affective forces that shape how young people live, relate, and endure within hostile environments (Chen et al. 2011). This framework allows us to explore how these individuals construct meaning from their experiences, seeing their struggles as part of larger systems of exclusion and abandonment, rather than isolated incidents. Through this lens, the study considers how survival is not only about navigating the present but also imagining alternatives beyond immediate crises.

Research Team Positionality

Our identities as scholars and mental health practitioners shaped how we interpreted the stories shared by coresearchers' (our term for *participants*; see below). The first author is a white settler, queer femme, and of Portuguese and Irish ancestry. She has worked with young survivors of violence and understands how care and survival are often entangled with harm. The second author, a Cree and English queer man, has worked extensively in suicide prevention, particularly within urban homelessness. Though neither of us has experienced houselessness, our positionalities—shaped by differing relationships to colonial systems, privilege, and gender —affected how we engaged with the study.

Recognizing the violence inherent in colonial and capitalist systems, we were committed to resisting the reduction of coresearchers' experiences to individual pathology. Instead, we understood housing insecurity and suicidality as structural conditions. As mental health researchers, we critiqued psychological theories that isolate distress from broader systemic forces, reducing complex realities to risk factors. Our approach framed survival as deeply political, inseparable from the conditions that produce harm.

We continuously reflected on how our positions within systems of privilege influenced the way we navigated the research and interpreted the coresearchers' narratives. This reflection allowed us to engage with the stories of harm, vulnerability, and survival in their full complexity, without seeking to categorize them neatly. Ultimately, we aimed to contribute to a reimagined approach to research on suicidality and housing injustice—one rooted in an awareness of structural violence and in the coresearchers' capacity to envision futures beyond systems of exclusion.

Methods

We employed narrative inquiry as the primary method because it deeply engages with the stories of marginalized individuals (Creswell 2013; Polkinghorne 1995). This method allows us to see how young women and femmes co-create their realities through language and link their stories to broader social structures. Narrative inquiry aligns with social constructionism's focus on relational knowledge, resisting the reduction of coresearchers' experiences into fixed categories. It highlights the ongoing processes through which meaning is created in contexts of precarity and exclusion.

Additionally, we used a life history approach within the narrative framework to emphasize that suicidality and housing injustice are not discrete events but are interconnected experiences shaped by coresearchers' interactions with systems over time. Coresearchers were invited to organize their stories through life chapters and critical events, allowing them to situate their narratives within larger societal ecologies. The interviews were semi–structured to provide coresearchers with the agency to shape their stories while also reflecting on the narratives they shared. This approach created space for imagining alternative futures, where survival involves continually reimagining what is possible.

Social Engagement and Data Collection

To maintain engagement with the communities this study sought to represent, we incorporated a method of social engagement throughout data collection. We reached out to 75 organizations that provide social and health services to young women and femmes, with 17 agreeing to support recruitment and offer feedback on the ethics and methods used. Several organizations made direct referrals while others offered to advertise study fliers. Coresearchers were compensated $100 for their time and insights, with payments delivered through their preferred method. This compensation was not merely procedural; it acknowledged the emotional labour and expertise coresearchers brought to the study, reinforcing the collaborative and respectful nature of the research.

Coresearchers

The study sample comprised eight coresearchers. All coresearchers were between 18 and 24 years old, which reflects the boundary of state-defined adulthood in Ontario and the recognized upper age limit for youth homelessness (Canadian Observatory on Youth Homelessness 2016, 1). Each coresearcher had experienced housing injustice in their lifetime such as renoviction, couch surfing, shelter living, sleeping rough, and/or engaging in survival sex, and each had self-identified as experiencing suicidality no sooner than two years prior to the interview. Anonymity was ensured by allowing coresearchers to choose pseudonyms or assigning one. This focus on self-identified young women and femmes was a deliberate choice to center the voices of those most affected by intersecting forms of marginalization. Quotations from coresearchers have been edited for readability.

Why Coresearchers, Not Participants

We used the term coresearchers instead of participants to reflect the collaborative ethos that guided our study. Grounded in feminist and social constructionist approaches, this decision challenges the hierarchical dynamics in traditional research settings. Referring to the young women and femmes as coresearchers acknowledges their agency and the role their lived experiences played in shaping both the inquiry and the emerging themes. However, this choice of language also reveals certain tensions. While we aimed to disrupt researcher-subject hierarchies, coresearchers were not involved in every stage of the research, particularly the formal analysis. Their input shaped the formation of themes, but they did not co-analyze data or fully determine the study's interpretations.

This tension between the intent to honour their roles and the practical limitations of research timelines, reflects a limit to the collaborative framing. Calling them coresearchers is an intentional commitment and an aspiration, reflecting their agency while acknowledging the challenges of deep collaboration. This invites broader reflection on dismantling power imbalances in research and creating more collaborative methodologies.

Analysis

The two authors of this paper conducted an analysis of narratives using Polkinghorne's (1995) paradigmatic method, which integrates both inductive and deductive categorization. Coresearchers' stories were organized into themes informed by theoretical frameworks. The analysis began with a detailed reading of each interview, treating it as a complete narrative and documenting reflections through memos (Birks, Chapman and Francis 2008). Line-by-line coding followed, with multiple readings allowing for nuanced interpretations of the data. From these readings, themes were identified based on their relevance to the research questions. The process of refining these themes involved repeated engagement with the data, ensuring clarity and consistency, and seeking intercoder agreement where necessary. Finally, a comparative analysis across narratives explored patterns of similarity, difference, and contradiction.

This iterative process enabled a deep engagement with the complexity of coresearchers' experiences, avoiding reductive explanations. The analysis illuminated how their stories reflected broader systems of abandonment while also highlighting acts of resistance and future-making, detailing both their present realities and their imaginative efforts to navigate survival under precarious conditions.

Results

When a Non-No is a Yes

This theme highlights the violations of autonomy and self-determination experienced by young women and femmes as they navigated care systems. These systems, often presented as protective, became mechanisms of control that silenced their voices and perpetuated harm. The stories shared reveal how their decisions were frequently overridden by those in authority, turning spaces of care into sites of coercion.

Ivy, an unhoused young woman, shared a harrowing experience with her therapist, who forced her to expose her self-harm despite Ivy's warning about how this could worsen her condition:

> ...so I told [REDACTED—therapist] that it's gonna escalate my severity and she said, "No, we have to see the cuts." That was the first time I cut the same cut more than once.... I only started doing it because she forced me to show the nurse.

This incident is emblematic of a broader pattern in which care systems impose gendered control over young women and femmes. The therapist's insistence on seeing Ivy's wounds reflects a paternalism within mental health systems, which often pathologizes and infantilizes young women, particularly those with intersecting identities related to gender, sexuality, and race. Instead of listening to Ivy's understanding of her distress, the therapist was focused on quantifying her pain. This disregard for her voice reflects a societal tendency to treat young women's pain as something external authorities must control, rather than respect and understand.

The violation didn't end there. The therapist's decision to escalate the situation by involving emergency medical services only deepened Ivy's distress:

> ...they took me in an ambulance to flipping [REDACTED—hospital]. And then there was a $40 ambulance bill. But the worst part is that the hospital bill came in the mail to my house. So, then my mom saw it. Then I had to lie and make up an excuse.... But I knew after that point I couldn't be in therapy with [REDACTED—therapist] anymore.

Not only was Ivy's autonomy violated in the moment but the decision intruded on her home life, exposing her struggles to her family. This led to further emotional labour, as Ivy had to lie to shield herself from additional scrutiny. Instead of care, her therapeutic relationship became a site of surveillance, where her choices and privacy were consistently undermined.

Ivy also described a traumatic experience with a psychiatrist during a hospital stay as a young teen. The psychiatrist was intent on probing her home life for a social service risk assessment:

> ...I dreaded every meeting with the psychiatrist [REDACTED—name], cuz it was an interrogation. She was trying to figure out what was going on... they had me talk to like CAS[1] people, you know CAS? And they had me talk to... a police investigator. And it's like I said, "No," why police?... I'm pretty sure I didn't say yes to this. Or maybe like they're taking my non-no as a yes? But I didn't know in that position I could say no.

Ivy's phrase, "non-no as a yes," encapsulates how systems of care often fail to recognize implicit refusal, especially when young women and femmes are unsure of their right to decline. The psychiatrist's relentless questioning and the involvement of police exacerbated Ivy's sense of violation and stripped her of agency. To resist divulging information, Ivy resorted to self-harm, highlighting how these systems perpetuate harm by disregarding autonomy.

Mavis, a post-secondary student who had experienced precarious housing, shared a similar dynamic from her teenage years when a nurse at summer camp violated her privacy by informing her mother about her health concerns despite Mavis's request for confidentiality:

> ...I wasn't getting any better and the nurse told me that she called my mom, and they decided to take me to the hospital. And I just started crying cuz I was like, "I can't, I can't go back with her." And the nurse just wasn't understanding.... She's like, "Your mom loves you so much and your mom's so concerned about you." And yeah. I'm like, "No, my mom's gonna be mad at me."

Mavis's story reflects the broader issue of how care is weaponized against young femmes. The nurse's decision to inform Mavis's mother, despite her explicit wishes, highlights how these systems assume they know what's best, often disregarding the expressed needs of the young people in their care. This paternalism is steeped in gendered power dynamics, where young femmes are viewed as incapable of making informed decisions about their well-being. The nurse's actions forced Mavis back into a situation she was trying to escape, showing how "helpful" interventions can perpetuate harm.

Similarly, Stardust, a young white queer femme accessing an urban drop-in center, described being pressured by a shelter worker into a decision that disregarded their need for autonomy. Despite expressing a desire for space and time before making decisions about where to shelter next, their worker insisted on placing them in a group home:

> My worker was determined to get me into a group home even though I did not wanna be in a group home. I was like, "I just need a break right now."... I was hanging out with only guys, the older ones. They would get alcohol for me. And I was like, "No, I'm gonna stay here for a bit.... Like, I need just to calm down and like do my own thing before I, you know, make another life choice."

Stardust's request for time was overridden by the worker's insistence on what they believed was best. When asked what would have been more helpful, Stardust provided the reflection: "Probably ask me why I'm here." Their reflection points to the broader failure of care systems to engage in meaningful dialogue about the causes of distress. Instead of respecting their expressed needs, the system imposed decisions for them, alienating Stardust further from future systems of care.

Across these narratives, the phrase "non-no as a yes" speaks to the widespread disregard for the autonomy and self-determination of young women and femmes in care systems. Their experiences show how gendered and classed dynamics intersect to create further harm, often in the name of protection. Instead of offering support, these systems impose coercion, leaving young people like Ivy, Mavis, and Stardust to face the emotional and physical consequences of decisions made for them, not by them.

Unsavoury People and Other Ruptures

This theme highlights the deeply personal and often painful ruptures in relationships that young women and femmes described as defining moments in their lives. These ruptures—whether with parents, caregivers, siblings, or authority figures—marked pivotal moments of betrayal, loss, and abandonment. The term "unsavoury" takes on new meaning here, describing not only dangerous or harmful individuals but also those relationships where the promise of care, safety, or love was met with mis-attunement or neglect. These fractured relationships left lasting wounds, eroding the coresearchers' ability to trust and rely on others.

Dee, a young Black woman accessing an urban drop-in center, spoke with raw honesty about the pain caused by her separation from her twin sister, a consequence of the child welfare system. The system's intervention, which meant to protect, instead drove a wedge between Dee and the one person who could have been her anchor:

> And then, I mean, around age 12, that's when [REDACTED—region] Children's Aid started to get involved again. And then, I was the first one to go back into foster care. And then a year later my sister did.... So, me and my twin sister, we don't have a great relationship. That's cuz of foster care. Because of foster. Yeah. If we were never separated. We would've been like this [fingers crossed], you know?

The pain in Dee's voice is unmistakable, reflecting the long-term impact of a system that was supposed to offer protection but instead created emotional estrangement. Her story underscores a painful truth: even well-meaning interventions can introduce profound instability, breaking apart relationships that might otherwise have provided comfort. In Dee's case, the foster care system facilitated the very rupture it sought to prevent, leaving her to navigate life without the foundational sibling bond she needed.

Dee's experience also exposes the racialized dimensions of these interventions. Black families, already marginalized by systemic disinvestment, are disproportionately impacted by child welfare surveillance and control (Edwards, Clark and Laylor 2023). The separation of Dee from her sister is emblematic of a broader societal pattern that views Black familial bonds as fragile or problematic, justifying further harm through forced separations. This dynamic of organized abandonment operates on multiple levels, intensifying emotional and relational instability.

For Dorothy, a young queer woman couch-surfing, the rupture came in the form of a strained relationship with her mother, exacerbated by her mother's refusal to acknowledge Dorothy's mental health struggles. Her mother's denial deepened Dorothy's isolation, leaving her to confront her distress alone:

> My mom and I don't terribly get along. We never have, and I don't think we ever will... her first response [to my distress] was almost like, for the first few years up until I was about 15, I think was when I properly got into therapy, um, was sort of denial for her. Like she didn't want to believe that I was feeling suicidal and didn't wanna believe that I was hurting myself and didn't wanna believe that I was starving myself. It's a lot of denial for her and a lot of me just sort of ignoring it.

Dorothy's words reveal the silent suffering that so often accompanies familial mis-attunement. Her mother's inability to confront Dorothy's distress not only denied her access to care but perpetuated a cycle of silence and neglect. The pain of being unseen and unheard becomes palpable here. This dynamic is not simply a personal

failing; it speaks to a broader societal tendency to dismiss or downplay the mental health needs of young women, particularly when their struggles are uncomfortable or inconvenient for those around them.

Jay, a Black femme who experienced homelessness, described the confusion and disillusionment that came with trying to discern who could be trusted. They reflected on how the people who appeared trustworthy often turned out to be the most dangerous:

> Uh, probably, uh, the whole, be careful who you trust. Cause a lot of people treated me different because I hang around unsavoury people. However, the good people that I would hang around with were more dangerous to me than these dangerous people.

Jay's revelation about trust flips societal assumptions on their head. The people society labelled as "good" or trustworthy were, in Jay's experience, far more dangerous than those judged as "unsavoury." Their words speak to the disorienting nature of navigating marginalization—where the very individuals meant to offer help often cause the most harm. For Jay, this realization led to a profound rupture in their ability to trust anyone, further isolating them in an already precarious existence.

Stardust echoes this sentiment of betrayal. As a child, they confided in a teacher about the violence they were experiencing at home, hoping for protection. Instead, the teacher relayed their disclosure back to their parents, which only worsened the abuse:

> Yeah. I think I was five or six. It was my grade one teacher. So I was five turning six in that year. Um, yeah. And she like shut me down and like, told everything to my parents and then everything got worse at home.

The weight of this betrayal is clear. Stardust's trust in an adult figure, someone they believed could protect them, was shattered when that trust was met with misunderstanding and negligence. Instead of receiving support, Stardust's situation became more dangerous. Their reflection about their teacher—"I can't actually go to you for anything"—reveals how moments like this fundamentally shape young people's willingness to seek help in the future.

Across these narratives, the notion of "unsavoury" expands to encompass not just individuals but the broader relational dynamics young women and femmes are forced to navigate. In a world where relationships are fraught with instability, betrayal, and harm, these young people learned early that trust is not something to be given lightly. Whether through systemic interventions or personal relationships, they experienced repeated ruptures that disrupted their ability to form meaningful connections, making them even more vulnerable to further harm.

These stories also highlight how the intersections of race, gender, and class compound relational ruptures. Dee's experience in foster care, for instance, was shaped not only by her status as a child in need of protection but by her identity as a Black girl. The system's failure to maintain her connection with her sister reflects a broader societal undervaluing of Black familial bonds. Similarly, Jay's realization that those perceived as "good" were often more dangerous than those deemed "unsavoury" speaks to the racialized judgments that frame Black youth, especially Black femmes, as inherently suspect, even when they are the ones most in need of protection.

These relational ruptures aren't isolated incidents. They are shaped by systems of exclusion, surveillance, and control. Child welfare, education, mental health services—all these systems failed these young people, leaving them to navigate a world where safety and support were elusive at best.

Inconsistency and Bouncing Around

This theme explores the profound sense of instability that shaped the early lives of the young women and femmes in this study. The instability they experienced—through frequent moves, family conflict, systemic in-

terventions, and exposure to trauma—was not circumstantial. It was the product of socioeconomic precarity and structural violence that marginalized their lives. Rather than growing up in nurturing environments, they were forced to navigate a world of constant uncertainty and upheaval, where stability was a distant, often unreachable, concept.

Caroline, a young white woman who had been living in AirBNBs, recounts the experience of frequent moves during her childhood, driven by her family's financial insecurity. Her story reflects a broader pattern of disinvestment in low-income communities, where access to stable housing is undermined by market forces and policies that prioritize profit over people:

> First two and a half, three years of my life we moved a lot, like eight times or something. Crazy amount, obviously, I don't really remember it, but we were back and forth.... My parents were broke so we were going where they could afford to live.... There was a lot of inconsistency that I think shaped a lot of my childhood.

Caroline's narrative speaks to the psychological toll of constant displacement. The lack of a stable home didn't just create material instability, it shaped her identity. Each move brought a sense of uncertainty, where stability felt impossible. Over time, Caroline began to attribute many of her struggles to this early instability, reflecting how deeply the economic precarity of her family impacted her sense of self and security.

Dee shared how her early life was marked by instability caused by family incarceration and child welfare interventions. She reflected on how her mother's imprisonment when she was two years old led to her and her sister being placed in foster care:

> Honestly, I went through foster care at a very young age. Like the age of two. 'Cause I was born in [REDACTED—city].... So me and my sister both grew up in foster care at a very young age.... My mama, she went to jail. So that's what resulted in us being in foster care for a while until my aunt adopted us.

Dee's story highlights how personal experiences of instability were compounded by institutional failures. The early separation from her mother, combined with frequent moves between foster homes, made it nearly impossible for her to form secure attachments. The very systems designed to protect her instead introduced new ruptures. Dee's sense of "bouncing around," with no fixed points of stability, shows how systemic responses to family crises can deepen trauma, particularly for marginalized families.

For Jaime, a young Indigenous woman, instability began even before she was born, rooted in the intergenerational trauma experienced by her parents. Reflecting on her early childhood, she described her life's beginnings as a "rocky start," shaped by her parents' unresolved trauma and substance use:

> I'd say before I was even born, things were off to a rocky start. My mom was 15 when she conceived me. She wasn't in a relationship with my dad. My dad was actually a drug dealer.… He had some usage issue with cocaine and a lot of unprocessed trauma on his part.... My mom hadn't processed the trauma of being repeatedly molested as a kid in her adoptive family.

Jaime's experience exemplifies how intergenerational trauma fuels instability. Her parents' struggles with addiction, violence, and unresolved trauma meant that Jaime's life began in chaos. She elaborated on how frequent moves shaped her sense of stability:

> The first five years, from what I remember, and corroborated by stories from my mom, and random people, I bounced around quite a lot.

Jaime's story illustrates how cycles of trauma and socioeconomic precarity create a deep sense of dislocation. Her early years, shaped by her parents' unresolved pain and addiction, led to a life of "bouncing around"— moving between homes, families, and schools. This instability, rather than being addressed, was often reinforced by systemic failures.

These narratives of instability—of "bouncing around" from home to home, family to family, place to place—are not just personal stories of hardship. They reflect broader systems of abandonment and neglect that disproportionately affect young women and femmes. The instability they experienced was not the result of individual failings but systemic inequalities: economic insecurity, incarceration, and the failure of social services to provide consistent, supportive care. These conditions shaped their lives, making it difficult to form lasting relationships or feel secure, further marginalizing them.

What emerges from these stories is a portrait of instability not just as a personal experience but as a structural condition. The "bouncing around" described by Caroline, Dee, and Jaime reflects how economic precarity, family separation, and intergenerational trauma intersect to create a world where stability is out of reach. These young women and femmes highlight how systems of care—whether child welfare, foster care, or the broader economic system—fail to provide the consistency and support they need. Instead, these systems often perpetuate the very conditions they claim to remedy, leaving young people to navigate lives marked by constant upheaval and uncertainty.

These stories also offer a broader critique of how society responds to marginalized young people. Rather than addressing the root causes of instability—poverty, trauma, and systemic inequality—social systems often entrench their precariousness. For these young women and femmes, the constant movement and lack of stable homes or relationships aren't just backdrops to their lives. They are central to their experiences of distress, shaping how they navigate the world and limiting their ability to imagine futures beyond survival.

Organized Abandonment and Chaos, Chaos, Chaos, Chaos

This theme delves into the realities of organized abandonment, a term Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022) uses to describe the deliberate withdrawal of resources and services from certain communities, leaving individuals to navigate systems that perpetuate instability and marginalization. These systems form a part of a broader ecology of abandonment in which care is unevenly distributed and chaos is naturalized as a condition of life for the structurally dispossessed. Organized abandonment exacerbates social inequalities, leaving chaos, confusion, and unpredictability in its wake. For the young women and femmes in this study, this chaos wasn't incidental but systemically produced by the very structures meant to provide support. The withdrawal of state and institutional care left them struggling to meet basic needs like housing, financial stability, and healthcare, all while managing personal crises. This chaos, born from structural neglect, compounded their vulnerabilities and made it difficult to imagine a future beyond mere survival.

Caroline's story is a striking example of this economic precarity. Despite her efforts to maintain employment, she faced exploitative labour conditions. She recounts her experience with employers who refused to pay minimum wage:

> Then I worked at [REDACTED—café]… I quit cuz they were awful. They wouldn't pay anyone minimum wage. They sucked. I had to file a whole labour board dispute claim against them, which I did win. Then after that, I got the [REDACTED—food services] job cuz it paid more and they were better.

Caroline's narrative reveals how precarious employment, shaped by broader systems of economic disinvestment, created a constant state of instability. Even though she won the labour dispute, there was no lasting change. Her need to constantly find new work reflects a life of pervasive uncertainty, where securing income is a fraught and uphill battle. The exploitation of labour in these systems keeps marginalized individuals like Caroline trapped, forced to navigate under-resourced, extractive conditions that perpetuate their instability.

Similarly, Dorothy spoke to the difficulty of maintaining financial stability while working in childcare and relying on insufficient government support. The pandemic, which disrupted the childcare sector, worsened her situation:

I've been working childcare since I was, I think 12 or 13 when I very first started. And obviously with COVID, childcare wasn't a thing. So, I was living off government payouts, but they weren't enough to absolutely keep me afloat. Being able to share an apartment with my ex was what I was able to do.

Dorothy's experience reflects how organized abandonment forces young people into precarious living arrangements simply to survive. Living with her ex-partner wasn't a choice based on emotional or relational safety, but made out of necessity driven by financial instability. The collapse of the childcare system during the pandemic left her scrambling and government support was simply not enough. Her story highlights the broader inadequacies of public safety nets, which fail those already living on the edge of precarity.

Dorothy's reliance on undervalued care work and insufficient support also speaks to the intersections of capitalism and care. The systemic devaluation of care work, especially done by women and femmes, reinforces cycles of dependence and instability. Organized abandonment isn't just about the withdrawal of public services but about how capitalist systems exploit marginalized communities while offering minimal support in return.

Jay also described how the chaos of homelessness reshaped their ability to dream beyond mere survival. The pressures of houselessness and low-wage work led them to become complacent about their future:

When you're put into a high-stress situation from being homeless to getting a place, you become complacent, and you kind of go off on all the things you wanted to do. At least for me, that's what happened. I became complacent. I became okay with the little job that I had. I worked at Starbucks and it's not a little job, but it's like, you know, it's not much. I became okay with that. I became okay living in a really tiny bedroom. I gave up on wanting an apartment or like, not necessarily higher education, but like a higher point in my career.

Jay's reflection on becoming "complacent" shows how the stress of navigating homelessness narrows one's ability to envision a future. The energy required just to survive meant their ambitions felt distant and unattainable. Their survival, while necessary, meant surrendering aspirations for something more. This is a clear example of how chaos and organized abandonment shrink the horizons of possibility for young women and femmes.

Jay also shared their frustrations with navigating social services while trying to pursue higher education. The bureaucratic contradictions between OSAP[2] funding, government assistance, and housing left them disempowered and trapped:

I told my team leader that I'm trying to work through this thing with my mom, and I just found out that I've technically been abused, I'm going to school, I don't really have time to look for a job, and I don't have the income for a place. She told me, "Well, you have a month because you do have the income, you get OSAP." I'm like, "But OSAP is for school, and it's not enough." "Well, you have OSAP, you could use that to pay rent. You could get OW."[3] I told them, "I can't get OW 'cause I'm on OSAP."[4]

Jay's struggle to navigate these services reflects the larger dysfunctions within social systems meant to provide support. Instead of offering a clear path forward, Jay found themselves juggling contradictory demands from different systems, each reinforcing their instability. As Jay summed it up, their life was marked by "chaos, chaos, chaos, chaos."

Ivy's story adds another layer to this narrative of chaos. As a high school student living without a fixed address, she faced daily uncertainty about where she could safely sleep:

I slept wherever I could sleep, but it was never good sleep. Not a good sleep for sure. I would sleep in school. I was doing an extra semester. Like I was 18, but I was doing an extra semester. I would sleep in class and put my head down. I was barely awake during the classes. Of course. But

what I did was I shifted my sleep schedule. So during the night, because I was awake, I would study. During the day, I would be in class, but I would have my head down to sleep.

Despite the chaos Ivy endured, her determination to continue school and find spaces to rest—even if precarious—speaks to an incredible resilience. Yet this resilience isn't simply an individual triumph; it's a testament to how young women and femmes are forced to navigate systems designed to abandon them. Ivy's life was consumed by survival, leaving little room for anything beyond the immediate need to find safety.

In each of these narratives, we see how organized abandonment breeds chaos. Public and private systems that should provide support instead intensify precarity, trapping young women and femmes in cycles of underemployment, housing insecurity, and bureaucratic confusion. The chaos doesn't just make their lives difficult, it systematically erodes their ability to imagine and pursue futures beyond mere survival. These stories are not just individual critiques but a broader indictment of how society's organized abandonment produces chaos as a defining feature of marginalized lives.

Discussion

In this study, we set out to explore the ecological dimensions of suicide risk for young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice. Through the narratives of Caroline, Dee, Dorothy, Ivy, Jaime, Jay, Mavis, and Stardust, it became evident that suicidality cannot be understood as an isolated, individual pathology. Instead, it is deeply embedded in a matrix of intersecting social, economic, and political forces. These forces manifested through housing instability, precarious employment, gendered violence, and systemic neglect. They not only shape the conditions in which suicide risk emerges but also influence how young women and femmes navigate, resist, and make sense of their distress.

Reconceptualizing Suicide Risk: Care as Coercion, Trust as Survival

A central insight from the coresearchers' narratives is their ambivalence toward care systems. Traditional models of suicide prevention, rooted in risk management and institutional interventions, often assume that care is inherently protective. However, Ivy's and Mavis's experiences illustrate that care can also operate as coercion, with institutional power overriding the autonomy, needs, and desires of those most affected. Ivy's experience of being forced to disclose her self-harm, despite her warnings of the further harm it would cause, exemplifies how care systems, particularly those aligned with carceral and medical logics, can perpetuate the distress they aim to alleviate.

This finding raises a conceptual issue within mainstream suicide prevention: the assumption that intervention, especially through coercive or mandatory reporting mechanisms, is always protective. As Ivy's experience shows, such systems often exacerbate distress, particularly when coercive interventions override young people's autonomy. Carceral logics in mental health care may inadvertently repeat and reinforce histories of psychiatric oppression related to classism, sexism, ageism, saneism, racism and other forms of discrimination (Krebs 2020). Research shows that involving young people in their care leads to better health outcomes (Vijayaraghavan et al. 2022). Trust, in this context, becomes essential, not just as an ethical component of care but as the very foundation of survival. When that trust is broken, as in Ivy's case, the consequences often extend beyond immediate harm, pushing young women and femmes further away from care systems and into isolation.

To address this, alternative models must be explored. Peer-led mental health initiatives, community-based support networks, and restorative justice frameworks offer non-coercive approaches that foster trust by giving individuals agency in their care. These models emphasize mutual support over control, offering more responsive, humane forms of care. For example, peer-led programs can create safe spaces where distress is met with com-

passion, not judgment, while community-based models often integrate cultural knowledge and collective support. Restorative justice practices provide healing frameworks that resist punitive responses, focusing on repairing harm through dialogue and relational accountability. Such approaches, grounded in trust and autonomy, challenge the hierarchical power dynamics inherent in conventional care systems.

As researchers, it is crucial to question how our methodologies, interpretations, or well-intentioned emphasis on "risk" might replicate the logics of control and surveillance critiqued by coresearchers. Baril's (2020) suggestion that suicide prevention must involve "staying with the pain" and creating space for dialogue about the desire to die without imposing guilt or coercion is particularly relevant. Our role is not just to analyze but to critically engage with and advocate for care frameworks that genuinely prioritize trust, consent, and relationality. This is essential to supporting the needs of marginalized young women and femmes in a way that aligns with their lived experiences and struggles for survival.

Relational Ruptures and the Politics of Abandonment

Another key insight concerns the relational dimensions of vulnerability. Coresearchers like Dee, Jay, and Stardust vividly described how relational ruptures—family separation, caregiver neglect, or mistrust of authority—shaped their suicidality. The breakdown of relational bonds exacerbates feelings of alienation and dislocation, especially for young women and femmes navigating housing instability (Gaetz et al. 2016; Schwan et al. 2020). Their disclosures are in line with existing literature that links suicidal ideation to attachment disruptions, profound isolation, and exclusion thereby producing remarkably painful affects like anger, shame, and self-hatred (Ezquerro 2024; Sheftall et al. 2013). Addressing these ruptures requires interventions focused on repairing relationships and building trust before significant vulnerability or crisis occurs (Syeda et al. 2021).

These ruptures are not merely personal crises but reflect the social fallout of larger systems of organized abandonment (Gilmore 2022). For young women and femmes navigating housing precarity, the breakdown of relational bonds compounds their sense of alienation. Jay's observation that "good people" were often more dangerous than "unsavoury" ones highlights the racial, gendered, and classed dynamics framing relational trust in precarious environments. This unpredictability contributes to feelings of chaos and mistrust.

This finding raises critical questions about how relationality is structured under systemic violence and neglect. How do we build systems of care that repair rather than rupture relationships? Interventions must focus not only on addressing immediate distress but on rebuilding trust, providing long-term support, and acknowledging the political dimensions of relational abandonment. This requires addressing social conditions—poverty, racism, gendered violence—that fracture relationships in the first place.

Instability as Trauma: Bouncing Between Systems of Precarity

The coresearchers' experiences revealed that instability and "bouncing around" between homes, schools, and systems of care are central to understanding how young women and femmes experience dislocation. Caroline and Jaime's story of being uprooted due to financial instability reflects the broader pattern of instability that defines the lives of many navigating housing injustice. This constant movement creates a sense of ungrounding that becomes a defining feature of their emotional landscape.

Instability can be understood as a form of trauma, an ongoing, cumulative condition that shapes how young people experience the world. Unlike traditional trauma models that focus on singular events, the instability described here aligns with Mills & Pring's (2023) analysis of "slow violence"—a persistent form of harm eroding well-being over time. The coresearchers' stories challenge the distinction between "big T" trauma and "little t" trauma, showing that experiences like housing instability and family disruption are deeply traumatizing. This instability is consistent with research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which show how early dis-

ruptions can have lasting impacts on well-being (Felitti et al. 1998). However, unlike conventional ACEs, the experiences described here—such as caregiver mis-attunement and frequent moves—show that even more nuanced forms of instability contribute to long-term distress, complicating how we understand trauma and its impacts. This calls for a reframing of how researchers and practitioners conceptualize trauma and instability. Pain (2019) offers the terminology of "chronic urban trauma" to describe the "subvisible temporalities and spatialities of slow violence" (Pain 2018, 386). In relationship to attachment trauma, Pain's conceptualization helps describe the causes of the ruptures our coresearchers described in context and explain why they become invisibilized in systems. By focusing only on clearly defined, recognizable forms of trauma, we risk overlooking the subtle but damaging forms of violence that structure the lives of marginalized young women and femmes. We must account for the cumulative, relational, and structural harms vividly described by the coresearchers.

Organized Abandonment and the Politics of Survival

This study also highlights the structural conditions perpetuating housing precarity, underemployment, and poverty. Coresearchers like Jay and Dorothy described how chaos becomes a mode of existence under conditions of systemic disinvestment. Their experiences navigating housing systems, welfare programs, and precarious work illustrate how survival itself becomes a full-time job, leaving little room for imagining futures beyond mere survival.

Gilmore's (2022) concept of organized abandonment provides a lens through which to understand this chaos. The chaos experienced by the coresearchers is not random, it results from political decisions that divest from public welfare, housing, and education. This systemic neglect makes suicidality a logical response to structural violence and is supported by research. For example, Raifman et al. (2022) found increased suicidal ideation for people struggling to pay rent, people who were let go from their jobs, and experiencing loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to years prior. If suicidality is partly a reaction to organized abandonment, then prevention efforts must extend beyond individual interventions into the realm of social justice. Prevention must include policies that alleviate poverty, provide stable housing, and ensure young people have the resources to live with dignity.

Reimagining Survival and Radical Futures

The narratives of young women and femmes in this study reveal that survival is not just about enduring present hardships but navigating complex systems that perpetuate instability and violence. Survival, in this context, is a political act of resistance–reconfiguring life in ways that challenge systemic abandonment. Despite profound precarity, these young people continue to imagine futures that resist the chaos imposed by systemic neglect.

Their survival is grounded in care, resistance, and creativity. For example, Ivy's ability to continue her education despite housing instability and Jay's reflection on navigating homelessness show that survival is an ongoing process of reimagining possibilities. These young women and femmes are continuously reconfiguring the conditions of their survival, even as those conditions are shaped by violence and exploitation.

Reconceptualizing Prevention: Toward Justice and Relational Autonomy

This study re-narrates the ecological risk of suicide for young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice by centering the political, relational, and affective dimensions of their lives. Suicide prevention must be rooted in collective action, relational autonomy, and justice. Prevention efforts must move beyond institutional interventions and embrace relational approaches that prioritize trust, dignity, and agency. Relationships—both personal and systemic—are at the heart of suicidality and survival. To address suicide risk meaningfully, we must build systems of care that repair relational ruptures, confront systemic abandonment, and provide the conditions for young people to thrive.

Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

One of the key strengths of this study is its ability to reconceptualize suicide risk through an ecological, relational, and structural lens, rather than reducing it to individualized pathology. By drawing on the rich, complex narratives of young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice, the research moves beyond conventional public health frameworks that dichotomize proximal and distal risk factors. Instead, it advances a more nuanced understanding of suicide that recognizes the political, social, and affective dimensions of risk. This shift invites new ways to think about suicide care, the relationality of suicidality, and what Cardon calls "suicide justice" that is, "the poetics of the possible" (Cardon 2022 75).

The narrative inquiry approach allowed for deep engagement with the coresearchers' lived experiences, emphasizing the significance of relational autonomy and collective struggle in understanding suicide risk. Reflexivity was central to the study, accounting for the positionality of both researchers and coresearchers, ensuring that power, identity, and context were acknowledged throughout. This reflexivity helped the study avoid replicating harmful logics of surveillance and control, instead centering the voices and agency of those most affected.

However, the study also wrestled with tensions around insider/outsider positionality. While the researchers sought to engage empathetically with the coresearchers, differences in identity, privilege, and power could influence both the research process and interpretation of findings. This raises the risk of perpetuating outsider perspectives, which might obscure the coresearchers' lived realities. Additionally, the study grappled with the challenge of understanding risk without centering damage, a concern raised by Tuck (2009). Focusing too much on harm can inadvertently re-inscribe marginalization, turning coresearchers into subjects of pity rather than agents of survival and resistance. Future research should continue to navigate these tensions carefully, ensuring that narratives of risk are counterbalanced with stories of resilience, creativity, and radical possibility.

Conclusion

This study reconceptualizes suicide risk as an ecological and political phenomenon, challenging narrow, individualistic frameworks. Through the stories of young women and femmes navigating housing injustice, we see how suicidality is shaped by intersecting forces—economic precarity, gendered violence, systemic neglect, and relational rupture. These are not simply external stressors; they constitute interlocking ecological conditions that saturate space, time, embodiment, and affect. These ecologies of harm—material, social, and affective— are embedded within the very structures that govern their lives, deeply shaping their capacities for survival and resistance.

A critical insight from this research is that survival itself becomes an act of radical imagination. The young women and femmes in this study enact everyday practices of resistance that are profoundly ecologically transformative—resistance that is relational, spatial, and improvisational. They reconfigure survival through the reassembly of disrupted geographies of care: forging trust amidst betrayal, carving out place in the absence of home, and cultivating meaning in conditions of abandonment. Understanding suicidality ecologically compels us to rethink prevention not as a psychological intervention into individual minds, but as a collective and material transformation.

Rethinking suicide prevention in this way requires confronting the systems that produce harm and constrain life. It means shifting the focus from managing individual risk to fostering relational, political, and material conditions that allow young people to imagine and build futures beyond racialized, gendered, and class-based oppression. It calls for policies that address the slow violence of disinvestment, infrastructures of care that prioritize relational autonomy, and practices of solidarity that recognize how survival itself is a form of resistance.

What emerges is a call to transform suicide prevention into a collective, politicized, and ecological practice, one that not only refuses the systems that reproduce harm but also cultivates the grounds for flourishing. By embracing radical imagination, we can prefigure futures in which living through the chaos is not the limit of possibility, but the foundation from which lives of dignity, autonomy, and collective power can grow.

Endnotes

1. CAS refers to Children's Aid Society and is a non-governmental child protective service in Ontario.

2. OSAP refers to the Ontario Student Assistance Program which provides financial support through grants and loans to post-secondary students.

3. OW refers to Ontario Works and it is a social assistance program for those in financial need.

4. In Ontario, you cannot receive both OSAP and OW at the same time.

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