



Finding Our Way Home: Research on
Indigenous Homelessness in Surrey

PART 1: RESEARCH REPORT ON INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

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1 INTRODUCTION

Research shows that Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by homelessness within urban settings with some studies estimating that one in 15 urban Indigenous individuals experience homelessness on a given night compared to 1 in 128 of the general population. [1]

Based on 2020 estimates for Surrey, it is estimated that 1 in 26 Indigenous people living in Surrey may be experiencing homelessness, though the actual number may be higher due to under-counting in the methodology. ¹

As part of the Finding Our Way Home project, an environmental scan was completed which included a review of publicly available literature on urban Indigenous homelessness and interviews with leaders in three communities working to address urban Indigenous homelessness: Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness in Victoria, Lii Michif Otipemisiwak Child and Community Services (LMO) in Kamloops, and Coalition to End Homelessness Winnipeg. The following individuals were generous enough to participate in an interview to help us understand how initiatives in other communities are working:

- Crystal Laborero – CEO – Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Circle
- Fran Hunt-Jinnouchi – Executive Director – Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness Society
- Jason Whitford – President and CEO – End Homelessness Winnipeg
- Jody Kidder – Manager of Operations – Lii Michif Otipemisiwak
- Justene Dion-Glowa – Indigenous Youth Support Services Team Lead – Lii Michif Otipemisiwak
- Lissie Rappaport – Housing Supply Manager – End Homelessness Winnipeg

¹ Skookum Lab's Housing Report 2020 estimated that the urban Indigenous population in Surrey was approximately 16,300 in 2020. The 2020 Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver identified 141 Indigenous people experiencing homelessness at the time of the count. Based on a methodology developed to estimate hidden homelessness [32], it is estimated that an additional 494 Indigenous people were experiencing hidden homelessness that year. Based on these figures, it is estimated that 1 in 27 Indigenous people living in Surrey would have been experiencing homelessness in Surrey Point-in-Time counts are known to yield an undercount as they represent only those individuals identified during the 24-hour period of the count. These figures are therefore considered conservative, and the real figures may be higher.

The focus of this research was to answer the following questions:

- ***What is Indigenous homelessness?***
- ***What are the causes of and contributing factors to Indigenous homelessness?***
- ***How are communities in Canada working to prevent, respond to, and support people exiting homelessness?***

The results of this research are summarized in this document. A complete list of interviewees and references can be found at the end.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Words to describe the experience of not having shelter are extremely varied and have evolved over time. Homelessness continues to be the most commonly used word to describe the experience and is generally recognized and understood across communities. In recent times, community advocates have called attention to how stigmatizing language around homelessness can be. For example, The Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness in Victoria created an anti-stigma poster that calls attention to harmful words such as “street-entrenched or involved”, “chronically homeless”, or “hard-to-house” that can be dehumanizing and person-blaming. See <https://acehsociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/stigma-poster.pdf> for more information.

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UNDERSTANDING INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS

2.1 Defining Homelessness

The experience of homelessness refers to either an individual, family, or community who lack stable, permanent adequate or appropriate housing. This also extends to those individuals or groups who do not have any immediate prospect, means, or ability of acquiring housing. According to the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH).

Homelessness describes a range of housing and shelter circumstances, with people being without any shelter at one end, and being insecurely housed at the other. That is, homelessness encompasses a range of physical living situations, organized here in a **typology** that includes 1) **Unsheltered**, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation; 2) **Emergency Sheltered**, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence; 3) **Provisionally Accommodated**, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure; and finally, 4) **At Risk of Homelessness**, referring to people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards. It should be noted that for many people homelessness is not a static state but rather a fluid experience, where one's shelter circumstances and options may shift and change quite dramatically and with frequency. [3]

The above typologies can also be narrowed down further to those who are **transitionally homeless**, a short-term state of homelessness that usually lasts less than a month; **episodically homeless**, a state of moving in and out of homelessness; and **chronically homeless**, a state of being homeless for a year or longer. [4]

Research shows that those most often experiencing homelessness in Canada are single adult males between the ages of 25 and 55 years old. This group accounts for approximately 47.5% of those experiencing homelessness. Indigenous peoples are overrepresented among those who experience homelessness in almost all urban centres within Canada. A universal approach

to addressing homelessness is not appropriate. Indigenous peoples, including those with families and those who are youth or women are sub-populations that also experience homelessness and require strategies suited to their specific needs. [4, 5]

2.2 Defining Indigenous Homelessness

In response to the unique factors that create the conditions for Indigenous homelessness, the COH, in work led by researcher and writer Jessie A. Thistle, and in consultation with scholars, community members, knowledge keepers and elders, developed a definition of Indigenous homelessness.

“Indigenous homelessness is a human condition that describes First Nations, Métis and Inuit individuals, families or communities lacking stable, permanent, and appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means, or ability to acquire such housing. Unlike the common colonialist definition of homelessness, Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews. These include individuals, families, and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages, and identities. Importantly, Indigenous people experiencing these kinds of homelessness cannot culturally, spiritually, emotionally, or physically reconnect with their Indigeneity or lost relationships.” [6]

The *Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada* provides twelve dimensions that explain the experience of Indigenous homelessness, as articulated by Indigenous peoples themselves. These dimensions should be viewed through a decolonized notion of what “home” means. This means going beyond considering homelessness as either episodic, transitional, or chronic. Indigenous views go beyond the binary of being housed versus unhoused and include the states of isolation of Indigenous Peoples from their ties to “land, place, water, family, each other, animals, languages, cultures and identities.” [2] The dimensions that contribute to all these states of homelessness include the following:

- **Historic Displacement Homelessness:** Indigenous communities and nations made historically homeless after being displaced from pre-colonial Indigenous lands.
- **Contemporary Geographic Separation Homelessness:** An Indigenous individual’s or community’s separation from post-colonial Indigenous lands.
- **Spiritual Disconnection Homelessness:** An Indigenous individual’s or community’s separation from Indigenous worldviews or connection to the Creator or equivalent deity.

- **Mental Disruption and Imbalance Homelessness:** Mental homelessness, described as an imbalance of mental faculties, experienced by Indigenous individuals and communities caused by colonization's entrenched social and economic marginalization of Indigenous peoples.
- **Cultural Disintegration and Loss Homelessness:** Homelessness that totally dislocates or alienates Indigenous individuals and communities from their culture and from the relationship web of Indigenous society known as "All My Relations."
- **Overcrowding Homelessness:** The number of people per dwelling in urban and rural Indigenous households that exceeds the national Canadian household average, thus contributing to and creating unsafe, unhealthy, and overcrowded living spaces, in turn causing homelessness.
- **Relocation and Mobility Homelessness:** Mobile Indigenous homeless people travelling over geographic distances between urban and rural spaces for access to work, health, education, recreation, legal and childcare services, to attend spiritual events and ceremonies, have access to affordable housing, and to see family, friends, and community members.
- **Going Home Homelessness:** An Indigenous individual or family who has grown up or lived outside their home community for a period of time, and on returning "home," are often seen as outsiders, making them unable to secure a physical structure in which to live, due to federal, provincial, territorial, or municipal bureaucratic barriers, uncooperative band or community councils, hostile community and kin members, lateral violence, and cultural dislocation.
- **Nowhere to Go Homelessness:** A complete lack of access to stable shelter, housing, accommodation, shelter services or relationships; literally having nowhere to go.
- **Escaping or Evading Harm Homelessness:** Indigenous persons fleeing, leaving, or vacating unstable, unsafe, unhealthy, or overcrowded households or homes to obtain a measure of safety or to survive. Young people, women and LGBTQ2S people are particularly vulnerable.
- **Emergency Crisis Homelessness:** Natural disasters, large-scale environmental manipulation and acts of human mischief and destruction, along with bureaucratic red tape, combining to cause Indigenous people to lose their homes because the system is not ready or willing to cope with an immediate demand for housing.
- **Climatic Refugee Homelessness:** Indigenous peoples whose lifestyle, subsistence patterns and food sources, relationship to animals, and connection to land and water have been greatly altered by drastic and cumulative weather shifts due to climate change. These shifts have made individuals and entire Indigenous communities homeless. [6]

This research found that the more dimensions experienced by Indigenous individuals, the greater their likelihood of experiencing chronic homelessness. Indigenous people have lower educational and labour market outcomes than non-Indigenous people which contributes to the physical or monetary aspect of homelessness. These outcomes become self-reinforcing and lowers the capacity of Indigenous people to pursue more educational and labour opportunities. With rising housing costs and prevalent discrimination, Indigenous people are more vulnerable to be in core housing need, be at risk of or experience homelessness.[7] In a report submitted to the House of Commons asking the Federal government to put more funding towards a National Indigenous Housing Strategy, it was estimated that 18.3% of Indigenous households were in core housing need, compared to 12.4% of non-Indigenous households, what is more, Indigenous households that were female-led or person with a disability-led were especially vulnerable.[8]

2.3 Causes and Contributing Factors

Research indicates the experience of being housed and unhoused is fluid--individuals may balance between the two and move from one state to another. For those who find themselves unhoused or homeless, there are often numerous overlapping, cumulative, and interconnected factors. Contemporary research indicates there are several key factors and systems that contribute to homelessness in Canada: [4]

- **Economic and societal structural factors** such as lack of income, economic recession, poor access to affordable housing and/ or health care, and/ or discrimination.
- **Living in state of poverty.** Poverty may mean there is no reserve fund if an individual faces unforeseen costs from either an illness, accident, or other cause. Living in poverty can make the difference between the ability to pay rent or not.
- **Lack of affordable housing.** Dealing with a shortage of affordable decent housing means that individuals and families may pay more than 50% of their income on housing, putting them in the precarious position of having to choose between shelter and other necessary needs.
- **Discrimination** based on race and sex can prevent access to employment, housing, health care and justice. Discrimination may also contribute to a shift from being housed to being unhoused; and may be an additional barrier for those currently experiencing homelessness, preventing them from accessing housing.
- **Failure of institutional systems** and governance bodies (e.g., child welfare, health care, corrections, migration services, and mental health and substance use services) to address policy and practice gaps. Transitions out of these types of systems as well as a failure to

effectively support individuals who need the services provided by these systems, may contribute to homelessness.

- **Personal circumstances** such as trauma, poor mental and / or physical health, addictions challenges, and relational challenges such as family violence contribute to homelessness.
- **Domestic violence**, particularly for youth, women, women with children, and seniors may shift individuals from a position where they are housed to one where they are not.

Indigenous peoples in Metro Vancouver, and in Canada, are disproportionately represented among homeless populations. [9] The *Metro Vancouver 2017 Aboriginal Homelessness Count* suggests that Indigenous peoples face unique barriers when living in urban settings and highlights specific factors contributing to urban Indigenous homelessness.

- **Racial and cultural discrimination** results of a deeply embedded rationalization of colonialization that pervades Canadian society to this day. Racial and cultural discrimination has been built into Canadian institutions and systems to ensure disparities in the distribution of resources and power so that colonizing powers may maintain their power. This has a detrimental effect on Indigenous political, economic, and cultural circumstances, and one such detrimental effect is a high representation of homeless Indigenous individuals.
- **Intergenerational trauma** refers to the trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples because of the creation of Canadian institutions that have attempted to eradicate Indigenous lifeways and worldviews and assimilate Indigenous peoples into settler-colonial ways. Contemporary research in mental health identifies intergenerational trauma as a key contributor to many personal, family, and community behaviours, including those which may put an individual at risk of homelessness.
- **Residential schools**, a mechanism the Canadian government used to assimilate Indigenous peoples from the 1870s up until 1996, are one particular Canadian policy that has resulted in intergenerational trauma. The detrimental impact these schools, including the erasure of Indigenous cultures, has contributed to social problems within Indigenous communities and families, and for individuals.
- **Child welfare and foster care policies** were another tool the Canadian government used to assimilate Indigenous populations. Removing Indigenous children from their communities often results in a loss of identity and culture and contributes to homelessness. A 2016 study identified that three out of every five homeless youth were part of the child welfare system.
- **The impact of migration** plays a role in Indigenous homelessness. Disparate policies and inadequate funding are available to Indigenous peoples both on- and off-reserve. Therefore, many Indigenous individuals move between home communities and urban environments, often moving to urban environments for educational and/or employment opportunities and for services not available in their home communities. These migrations may lead to a loss,

erosion, or disconnection of community support and social capital, leading to greater risks of homelessness.

- **Economic discrimination**, such as the discrimination associated with securing adequate affordable housing in urban areas may lead to homelessness. For example, a part of most housing applications require credit history checks, and often Indigenous peoples who have been living in their home communities do not have a credit history.
- **The cost of housing in Metro Vancouver** is often highly prohibitive, rated as having the worst housing affordability in Canada. Metro Vancouver's 'severely unaffordable' nature is based on a mainstream population who does not experience the same kind of racial, cultural, and economic discrimination and disadvantage. Therefore, Indigenous individuals living in the Metro Vancouver area are at a much greater disadvantage when it comes to securing adequate affordable housing.
- **Changing government policy** since the 1980s has resulted in disinvestment in affordable housing, a general restructuring of the economy, and a resultant increase in homelessness. In BC, shelter maximum rates for households on Income Assistance have been static since 2007 despite escalating housing costs, resulting in a significant increase in the number of Income Assistance recipients experiencing homelessness.
- **The impact of hidden homelessness** is particularly dire for Indigenous peoples. Hidden homelessness refers to those who are precariously housed, such as those couch surfing, or temporarily staying with friends or family due to the absence of permanent housing, or the absence of any immediate prospect of acquiring housing. Although hidden homelessness is a problem for as many as 50,000 Canadian residents on any given night, in Indigenous community, this is considered normal and acceptable. [9]

2.4 What We Heard

We completed interviews with leaders of Indigenous organizations and coalitions in Victoria, Kamloops, and Winnipeg who are working to end Indigenous homelessness. Here is what they told us about what is driving Indigenous homelessness:

- **Causes of Indigenous homelessness** are well known within the community including colonization, the Sixties Scoop, the child welfare system, and the disproportionate levels of Indigenous children in care. Addictions and poverty keep people in a cycle of homelessness.
- The **shame** associated with the disconnection from community, culture, and language makes it harder for individuals to reach out to their own families.
- **Non-Indigenous approaches** to address urban Indigenous homelessness often fail because there are no pathways to healing and recovery that consider **physical, mental,**

emotional, and **spiritual healing**. Indigenous people **do not trust** many non-Indigenous organizations.

- Indigenous people in urban areas are disconnected from land, community, and Creator. The barrier is not just the access to housing. Indigenous people are **striving for a sense of purpose** and a **sense of hope**. Until they can regenerate that, they will remain in a vortex of survival.
- **Oppression** of Indigenous people has led to their **overrepresentation** in the criminal justice and child welfare systems. Recent incarceration or aging out of foster care are common pathways in homelessness. Youth aging out of care are not supported in transitioning to adulthood and they do not know how to live on their own.
- Since the **COVID-19 pandemic** started, everything has gotten out of control. The number of people requiring services had increased. **Stigma has worsened** against Indigenous people and Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. This stigma extends to agencies, as people have been harassing some staff providing services.

3 | PROMISING PRACTICES

The *Canadian Observatory on Homelessness* identifies three approaches to addressing homelessness: **prevention, provision of emergency services, and moving people into housing and providing them with adequate supports**. There has been a contemporary shift away from simply managing homelessness to preventing it and providing pathways out of homelessness. [10]

3.1 Preventing Homelessness

Preventing homelessness involves addressing the causes and contributing factors of homelessness. These may be summarized as **structural factors, system failures, and individual circumstances**, and the interplay between these three elements. Structural factors can include issues of poverty, discrimination, lack of affordable housing; and the impact of colonialism on Indigenous Peoples. System failures are the result of a failure of policy and service delivery that can result in access barriers to public systems; failed transitions from publicly funded agencies; and it can be the result of silos and gaps between various forms of governance. Lastly, prevention means helping people who are dealing with individual circumstances such as personal or family crises, housing insecurity, interpersonal and relational challenges, persistent disability, violence, and trauma. [10]

A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention defines the prevention of homelessness as:

“...policies, practices, and interventions that reduce the likelihood that someone will experience homelessness. It also means providing those who have been homeless with the necessary resources and supports to stabilize their housing, enhance integration and social inclusion, and ultimately reduce the risk of the recurrence of homelessness.” [10]

There are three levels of homelessness prevention (not Indigenous specific) according to *A Framework for Homelessness Prevention*:

1. **Primary Prevention** – ‘Working upstream’ to mitigate the detrimental effects of structural and systems factors that contribute to risk of homelessness. These are generally actions that are directed at a whole community to build protection around it. For example, primary prevention might include poverty reduction strategies, increasing and improving housing stocks, early childhood supports, and anti-violence campaigns.
2. **Secondary Prevention** – These include strategies that focus directly on those at imminent risk of homelessness, or those who experience episodic homelessness. Secondary prevention includes systems prevention; taking steps to ensure individuals exiting child welfare, corrections, or mental health do not exit into homelessness.
3. **Tertiary Prevention** – The goal of tertiary prevention is to mitigate the recurrence of returning into homelessness by providing supports to exit homelessness and to maintain housing stability. [10]

This research indicates that preventing homelessness requires action beyond the individual level; it requires systems outside of homelessness and housing sectors to play a larger role, and includes systems such as child welfare, justice, corrections, social welfare, health care, education, and housing. In order to clearly define what prevention is, it is important to define what it is not. Homelessness prevention does not include services or supports that are provided to homeless individuals in emergency situations; if an individual remains homeless after receiving a support or service, then the support or service does not qualify as homelessness prevention.

3.1.1 HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Homelessness prevention applies across a diversity of homeless demographics; however, there are specific practices which are considered appropriate and beneficial for Indigenous homeless populations. There is, however, an overall lack of research on homelessness prevention for Indigenous Peoples. [11] From the evidence that does exist, promising practices that work to prevent Indigenous homelessness include [12]:

- Offering **culturally safe and appropriate services**. Current approaches which focus on a *Housing First* model take a harm reduction approach, providing chronically homeless individuals with housing and wrap-around support services. This approach, however beneficial for many, is not always appropriate for Indigenous families who wish to live independently. [11, 13] A more inclusive approach would offer family oriented, and collectivist supports for Indigenous families, and would include Indigenous ceremony and spirituality, offering not just a physical home but also a sense of ‘home’ for Indigenous families. Some research suggests that cultural safety is not well understood and not well utilized in the delivery of care for Indigenous Peoples who are homeless; therefore, a better understanding of and more rigorous training about cultural safety is essential.

- Starting from a **human rights-based approach**. In theory, this approach ensures all institutions and systems and the embedded policies and interventions within must ensure individuals and families can access transitional supportive services for as long as they are necessary. This may include fixing policy and procedural barriers to create easier access and support; streamlining access to public systems, services and supports; and work around facilitating improved reintegration into society from public institutions. [10]
- **Improving and streamlining organizational partnerships**. This is essential to ensure a solid coverage of, and effective communication between, preventative services and programs. There exists a scarcity of resources available to prevent Indigenous homelessness; therefore, it is crucial that cross-cultural partnerships between organizations be made to share collective resources.
- **Improving Indigenous governance and coordination**. Indigenous leadership and governance in sectors addressing homelessness are lacking overall, despite being an essential component of improving and streamlining organizational partnerships and ensuring culturally appropriate support. Research performed by Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA) has shown that homelessness programs created, implemented and governed by Indigenous Peoples and groups have improved outcomes. [13]
- **Increasing Indigenous staffing** in organizations that serve Indigenous homeless individuals and families at all scales. This is a key step towards improving Indigenous governance and coordination in homeless and housing sectors. Having Indigenous representation within organizations serving homeless individuals and families is crucial for increasing trust and comfort among Indigenous Peoples seeking help.
- **Providing adequate and equitable funding** that is long-term is required for organizations to offer comprehensive and reliable service provision and staffing.
- **Promoting cultural reconnection**. This involves providing services, policies, and activities specifically for Indigenous homeless individuals; acknowledging the significance of providing cultural connectivity through these services, policies, and activities. This may mean building Indigenous cultural safety into policies; providing regular access to Elders or access to Indigenous specific activities such as traditional craft classes; and ensuring there is service provision offered by Indigenous staff.
- **Subsidizing childcare for Indigenous families** with specific focus on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for Indigenous communities. Families experiencing homelessness are on the rise and Indigenous families headed by women face additional vulnerabilities and barriers to being housed. When compared to the national average of 19%, 40% of Indigenous children live in poverty. [11] Subsidizing Child Care so these families may pursue employment opportunities is crucial to overcoming Indigenous homelessness. [2]

- **Ensuring affordable housing development** is possible through current bylaws and municipal practices. This is not specific to Indigenous people. In general, Metro Vancouver and other Canadian communities are experiencing serious shortages of deeply affordable housing which limits options for existing homelessness, A more supportive municipal regulatory and policy context is needed to encourage more of this type of housing. [11]

3.1.2 CASE STUDIES

The list provided above is a starting point for implementing promising practices, but it is important to understand what that looks like on the ground through case studies of promising practices being implemented across in BC and Canada.

Government of Canada Reaching Home Program [14, 15]

At the highest level, the Government of Canada put forward *Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy* in 2019, to support a community-based program with the goal of preventing and reducing homelessness across Canada; specifically, this program aims to "reduce chronic homelessness nationally by 50% by fiscal year 2027 to 2028". The *Reaching Home* program dedicated \$145 million from 2019-2024 for an Indigenous Homeless stream, and \$23 million from 2019-2024 for a Territorial Homelessness stream. While not Indigenous-specific, the Territorial stream has a large focus on Indigenous homelessness due to the high proportion of Indigenous Peoples living in the Territories.

Within this same strategy, the Government of Canada has dedicated \$35.8 million for Distinction-Based Approaches to addressing Indigenous homelessness between 2019-2024. The prevention of homelessness by the Federal Government refers only to "activities aimed at preventing homelessness by supporting individuals and families at imminent risk of homelessness before a crisis occurs."

Therefore, deeper structural and systemic factors are not considered in their approach. *Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy's approach to addressing homelessness* is based on the "Housing First" model.[15] In terms of prevention, "Housing First" works to remove individuals and families from chronic homelessness and works to prevent them from returning to homelessness by maintaining housing stability. As such, this model is considered tertiary prevention and does not include elements of primary and secondary prevention (see 3.2 and 3.3).

The Giwetashkad Indigenous Homelessness Plan from the territory of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, and Attawandaron (London, Ontario) [16, 17]

The City of London has developed a *Housing Stability for All Plan* which sets a vision and direction for addressing homelessness in London and aligns with other strategic initiatives and plans. In particular, London's plan aligns and integrates with the Giwetashkad Indigenous Homelessness Plan, a plan developed by the non-profit organization, AtLohsa Family Healing Services and supported by the City of London. Giwetashkad, an Anishnaabemowin name meaning "circle" or "coming back around", was given to this plan to represent the community coming together. The Giwetashkad Advisory has been working to bring Indigenous world views to the forefront in informing strategies on homelessness since 2017. This Indigenous homelessness plan is a first step in preventing Indigenous homelessness as it strives to build internal Indigenous capacity and coordination, cultivate community leadership and advocate for systems change. [18]

With the municipality working in tandem with other community agencies, London is also working to ensure coordinated access for support is available to all individuals and families at risk of homelessness. Within this approach, the City of London has created a coordinated city-wide approach that supports those recently discharged from hospitals and facing risk of homelessness. Overall, the City of London has promising practices which promote cultural reconnection, improve Indigenous governance and coordination, increase Indigenous staffing, improve, and streamline organizational partnerships, attempt to offer culturally safe and appropriate services, and take a human rights-based approach.

Tupa Grandmothers Lodge from the territory of the Syilx, Nlaka'pamux, and Secwépemc (Kelowna, BC) [19]

The Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society provides supportive housing focused on providing support to Indigenous mothers who are at risk of losing their children because of barriers to accessing adequate stable housing. Tupa's Lodge offers affordable housing options with an in-house Elder available to support and guide new mothers on how to best support their children. This project is meant to prevent mother-led Indigenous families from becoming homeless and provides a supportive housing which is culturally appropriate, safe and offers opportunities for cultural (re)connection.

3.2 Responding to Indigenous Homelessness

What is being done to better support Indigenous people who are currently experiencing homelessness? There is a great deal to choose from in terms of initiatives across Canada that provide emergency supports such as warming centres, harm reduction supply distribution, nutrition, and counselling to name a few. Institutions and agencies are working to provide these types of supports through a decolonized lens. Indigenous-led and staffed initiatives offer basic supportive services to Indigenous homeless individuals and families and as such, work to promote cultural reconnection, offer culturally safe and appropriate services, apply a human rights-based approach, and, simply by existing, work to improve Indigenous governance and coordination which may support reducing homelessness over time by centring Indigenous values and practices in service delivery and reducing barriers to early access to supports.

3.2.1 CASE STUDIES

The Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness Initiatives on the unceded territory of the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples (Victoria, BC) [20, 21]

The (ACEH) has grown several impactful projects in Victoria, BC between 2020 and 2021 including:

The Culturally Supportive House, a homeless shelter which offers culturally supportive housing as well as Indigenous Alcohol Harm Reduction services to several Indigenous homeless individuals.

Speqəḡéutxw (Spaken) House, which provides culturally supportive housing for Indigenous women experiencing homelessness and/or fleeing violence. This housing initiative offers land-based healing programming, traditional foods, and decolonized harm-reduction practice, as well as an onsite elder in residence. The model used at Speqəḡéutxw House combines culturally focused programming with decolonized harm reduction services.

Family Reunification Program, which supports intergenerational reunification between children, parents, and grandparents. The program offers a home setting where visitations can take place for up to one week.

Additional services offered by the ACEH include Indigenous Alcohol Harm Reduction Program, Nutrition boxes for Indigenous families, and an Indigenous Systems Improvement Mapping Project.

Fast Lane for Affordable Housing Approvals on the unceded territory of the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples (Victoria, BC) [22]

As a response to a commitment to address affordable housing needs and prevent homelessness in the City of Victoria, new legislation was passed earlier this year which is meant to fast track the development of new affordable housing. This new legislation ensures that those agents, whether non-profit, government or co-op housing organizations, working to build more affordable housing will no longer need to go through rezonings or public hearings, as long as they are consistent with the City's Official Community Plan. This removal of "red tape", although not Indigenous specific legislation, aligns with the promising practice of taking a human rights-based approach which removes procedural barriers that might impinge on a person's right to adequate and safe housing, and additionally, aligns with the recommendation to ensure inclusionary zoning and affordable housing development. This landmark ruling for a BC municipality has the potential to enable an increase in the amount of affordable housing built, including housing which is culturally safe and appropriate for Indigenous Peoples.

3.3 Exiting Homelessness

The federal government's "Housing First" best practice, which involves moving those experiencing chronic homelessness into long-term housing with support is the most ubiquitous strategy across Canada. This strategy has been shown to be effective in reducing chronic and episodic homelessness while also reducing the use of emergency services and shelters. [23] The principles of *Housing First* include the following [15]:

1. Rapid housing with supports.
2. Offering clients' choice in housing.
3. Separating housing provision from other services.
4. Providing tenancy rights and responsibilities.
5. Integrating housing into the community.
6. Strengths-based and promoting self-sufficiency.

For those exiting homelessness, the key components of "Housing First" include those supportive services that come with acquiring housing.

For Indigenous Peoples exiting homelessness, it is essential that these supportive services are culturally safe and appropriate and even provide room for cultural reconnection. According to the 2017 Report on Aboriginal homelessness for Metro Vancouver, the "Housing First" model

has not been successful in helping Indigenous Peoples' exit homelessness due to the high cost of housing, the rigid definition of homelessness, and the lack of funding. [9] There are, however, programs such as the two listed below that provide promise.

3.3.1 CASE STUDIES

Nikîhk Housing First Program in the territory of the nêhiyaw, Dené, Anishinaabe, Nakota Isga, and Niitsitapi Peoples (Edmonton, Alberta) [24]

The Nikîhk Housing First program provides support to Indigenous Peoples in exiting homelessness, and is a collaborative partnership between Homeward Trust Edmonton and Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society. The program is a one-stop shop for individuals and families with the following services:

- Securing financial support or student funding
- Locating rental properties
- Obtaining furniture
- Learning financial literacy
- Advocacy
- Trauma support
- Goal setting
- Cultural (re)connection/ (re)connection to Elders
- Connections to other various resources

Lii Michif Otipemisiwak Child and Community Services in the territory of the Tk'émłúps te Secwépemc (Kamloops, BC) [19]

Lii Michif Otipemisiwak Child and Community Services offers a range of programming and wrap-around support services for Métis youth who have aged out of foster care, and support families and children to promote cultural (re)connection, and to sustain kinship. The services offered by this organization preventing homelessness, to responding to homelessness, to supporting with exiting homelessness. On the prevention front, this organization provides culturally safe housing (Kikekyelc: A Place of Belonging) for Indigenous youth ages 16 to 27 who have come from child welfare services and are not yet ready to live independently. This organization also offers follow up outreach services to those youth with behavioural issues who left the centre and now are homeless. This provides these youth with an open door back in with supports waiting for them should they return.

3.4 What We Heard

Our interviewees from Victoria, Kamloops, and Winnipeg highlighted the following promising practices for Indigenous housing and services for those at risk of or experiencing homelessness:

- **Culturally supportive housing:** This is a model of housing that uses a dual model of housing care. One pillar is culturally supportive housing, and the second pillar is decolonized harm reduction practice rooted in land-based healing. Non-Indigenous spaces often focus on the physical and mental. Their model uses a holistic approach to look at the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. The **Indigenous-led approach** focuses on the strength of the individual and conveys the strong community and ancestry they come from. Their model does not try to replicate the existing model of housing; they have positions including an Elder mentor and an Aunty. Access to culture is key; it is not just about traditional ceremonies, but it can include access to land-based healing, Elders, food, culture, and sweats.
- **Low barrier and wraparound services:** Several organizations will not work with individuals who are using substances, which is becoming a significant issue. In the past, some organizations have not let people come to traditional sweat if they were not sober, but now there is an understanding of more chronic barriers to recovery. For individuals with chronic challenges, low barrier supports are the **most realistic approach** – but this support needs to be coupled with wraparound services. A key reason low barrier supports have failed in the past, including safe injection sites, is the lack of additional wraparound services that can support an individual. These wraparound services include **access to their culture**, to Elders, and to the land.
- **Indigenous youth:** Focusing on Indigenous youth should be a key component of any solution. There is a need to support young Indigenous people and teach them how to live independently. This includes connecting them to their culture and to Elders as well as showing them how to cook, budget, and get groceries. The solution needs to create a place of belonging to ensure we stop creating the trauma or else it will be an endless cycle.
- **Indigenous-led, system-level change:** An important piece of the solution is having Indigenous peoples and Indigenous organizations come together to change the system. Many of the problems facing Indigenous people experiencing homelessness are institutional and larger than any individual can address on their own. Groups such as the Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Circle are bringing Indigenous organizations together to explore system-level issues associated with housing and homelessness.

4 | POLICY GAPS

4.1 Federal Level Gaps

Numerous organizations and individuals are advocating for a National Indigenous Homelessness and Housing Strategy, including the National Aboriginal Housing Association, CHRA Indigenous Caucus, and Paul Manly, former MP for Nanaimo-Ladysmith, BC.

The lack of a national strategy to address urban Indigenous homelessness is a glaring gap, as well as a lack of data on the scope, causes and demographics of Indigenous homelessness. [25] This is especially problematic considering the commitments Canada has made the following commitments as part of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, including the following:

- Support for First Nations children
- Implementing Indigenous child welfare legislation
- Addressing the legacy of residential schools
- Improving Indigenous health outcomes
- Promoting mental health and wellness
- Improving First Nations Elementary and Secondary Education
- Ensuring clean drinking water and improved infrastructure in First Nation communities
- Investment in housing
- Implementing the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*
- Supporting Indigenous economic development
- Partnering with Indigenous Peoples in natural resource projects [26]

The Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA) was established in 1996 with a mission to lead and advance housing rights for ALL Indigenous Peoples in British Columbia.

AHMA is comprised of 55 Indigenous housing and service providers located across the province. These members manage more than 95% of all Indigenous housing units in urban, rural, and northern areas of the province (off reserve). The programs and services that AHMA members provide include affordable housing units, homeless shelters, transition homes, supportive housing, and assisted living facilities. Many of AHMA's members also offer support services including homelessness prevention, parenting skills, mental health programs, and substance use support. AHMA members make up over one third of Indigenous housing providers in Canada.

AHMA's role is to represent and advocate for the Indigenous housing sector across BC, as well as administering operating and capital agreements, which support 5,500 units that house First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and self-identified Indigenous families living in urban, rural, and northern parts of the province..

In the report, *The Roots of Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada*, AHMA highlights and criticizes three programs within the federal government's response to homelessness and how they fall short of solving Canada's homelessness crisis: the *National Homelessness Initiative* (NHI), the *Homelessness Partnering Strategy* (HPS), and the *Affordable Housing Initiative* (AHI). In particular, the report criticizes AHI for a "lack of a coherent goal and insufficient capacity to meet housing needs." NHI and HPS were designed to focus on underserved populations, but AHMA suggests these programs only increase demand for resources that communities have difficulty funding. [13]

AHMA's most recent 2022 report reflects input from existing Indigenous housing and service providers in BC, tenants, stakeholders, government agencies, and Indigenous organizations, and outlines a 10 Year Housing Strategy based on the needs of off-reserve Indigenous Peoples in BC. AHMA criticizes Canada's National Housing Strategy (NHS) which includes key targets to reduce homelessness and poverty and identifies specific housing needs of Indigenous Peoples but does not allot enough money or resources for Indigenous Housing within the NHS. The report states.

There is simply not enough money allocated to Indigenous housing in the NHS. Two percent of funding that has been notionally allocated in the NHS towards Indigenous households is not proportional to the size of the Indigenous population in Canada residing off reserve (4.1%), nor is it reflective of the fact that Indigenous people living off reserve represent 7% of the households in core housing need. The Parliamentary Budget Officer determined that there is a \$636 million annual gap between what Indigenous households in urban, rural, and northern areas across Canada can afford to pay for adequate housing, and the cost of obtaining it.

Within the NHS, there is no requirement for provincial governments to use NHS funding for Indigenous specific housing, creating gaps at the provincial level as well. [27]

4.2 Provincial Level Gaps

BC has several programs and initiatives that are meant to address housing and homelessness, including more than 11,000 subsidized units, rent supplements and emergency shelter spaces for those experiencing homelessness, or those at risk of homelessness. [28] One of the most glaring shortcomings of BC provincial (and federal) housing policies and programs are that they are not collaboratively created with Indigenous Peoples and therefore, do not necessarily reflect Indigenous needs or interests. [27]

4.3 Local Level Gaps

Within BC, research suggests that the federal and provincial governments' commitment to respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples is not being adequately reflected within municipal housing strategies and Official Community Plans. A study that investigated whether municipalities identify Indigenous specific housing needs in their planning documents found the following:

- 2/13 municipalities explicitly acknowledged or addressed urban Indigenous housing needs in the creation of their OCP or Housing Strategies.
- 7/13 municipalities agreed that urban Indigenous housing needs are unique from those of the general population.
- 5/12 municipalities collected or intend to collect Indigenous-specific data for their Housing Needs Report.
- 4/32 municipal documents such as OCPs and Housing Strategies acknowledged Indigenous specific housing needs. [29]

SUILC has worked to fill this gap in Surrey. The publication of Skookum Lab’s Housing Report 2020: Understanding the Housing Experiences of Indigenous Households in Surrey was the first Indigenous housing needs assessment done in the community.

4.4 General Gaps

While housing is a crucial element in addressing Indigenous homelessness, there is an overall lack of data, reporting and Indigenous focus for homelessness and engagement around what is needed to prevent and permanently exit homelessness. An assortment of homelessness counts have been completed in various municipalities across Canada, but no national enumeration of the urban Indigenous homeless population exists. [30] Work to understand local Indigenous homelessness, and to hear from Indigenous people with lived experience, such as that being completed through the *Finding Our Way Home Project*, appears to be extremely rare at any level of governments.

Finally, often overlooked when addressing urban Indigenous homelessness is the impact of NIMBYism. NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard) refers to push back from residents near proposed housing developments or shelters. Opposition to deeply affordable and emergency housing continues to persist in Surrey and other Canadian communities due to fear, stigma, misunderstanding, or exclusionary attitudes. NIMBYism may surface legitimate concerns but is often the result of exclusionary attitudes and/ or attitudes that reflect a notion that residents should be able to control who moves into their neighbourhood. NIMBYism has a negative impact the approval of proposal projects, including on rental and ownership opportunities for Indigenous Peoples, and this is particularly problematic for creating Indigenous-specific affordable housing projects. [30, 31]

4.4.1 WHAT WE HEARD

Interviewees with leaders in Victoria, Kamloops, and Winnipeg highlighted the following gaps:

- **Staffing** is one of the main challenges to operating Indigenous led and culturally supportive housing. As the sector has grown, the availability of trained Indigenous housing workers has not kept pace. It is difficult to find an Indigenous support worker or housing manager. More training and higher pay is needed to attract and retain workers in this sector. If the lack of training opportunities and low pay is not addressed, Indigenous-led approaches will continue replicating conventional models that we know are not working.
- **Long-term and adequate funding** of housing projects is needed. Governments have increased funding since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic which has spurred many new projects. However, a lot of this funding is temporary, and organizations fear the funding will dry out.

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