

Canadian Intro Section (DRAFT)

Indigenous peoples in Canada and colonial legacies

Indigenous peoples in Canada include the Inuit, First Nations and Métis. Within each group, there is considerable spiritual, cultural and geographic diversity across many sub-groups. Today, Indigenous peoples in Canada total approximately 1, 400, 685, accounting for 4.3 percent of the total population (StatsCan 2011). This total includes 851, 560 people of First Nations descent, 451, 795 Métis, and 59, 445 Inuit (ibid. 2011). A brief overview cannot possibly do justice to the diversity of Indigenous peoples in Canada, nor to the many social, economic, cultural, political and health issues bound up within Indigenous geographies of homelessness. Nevertheless, by way of introduction and context, this overview offers key threads, all of which are necessary to understanding the current landscape of Indigenous homelessness in Canada.

Each Indigenous group in Canada has different histories of European contact, as well as different historical and contemporary relations with the State. For First Nations people, particularly in eastern and central Canada, prolonged contact with Europeans occurred with the establishment of permanent European settlements in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 prohibited the purchase of First Nation lands by any party other than the Crown. Several treaties were signed after the Royal Proclamation and before Confederation in 1867. After Confederation, a series of eleven treaties (known as “numbered treaties”) were signed between Indigenous peoples in Canada and the Crown from 1871 to 1921. Under the treaties, First Nations gave up large areas of their traditional homelands to the Crown. In exchange, the treaties were meant to provide Indigenous peoples such things as reserve lands and other benefits, annual treaty payments, and certain hunting and fishing rights. The treaties are now overseen by the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. Furthermore, because of the relations established through the treaties and the Indian Act, the federal government has a fiduciary responsibility to provide health care, housing, and other services to those “status”¹ Indigenous people living under treaty (and similarly, though not identically, to

¹ A “status Indian” is someone who is registered and recognized as Indigenous with the federal government and/or is registered to a band which has signed a Treaty with the Crown. A “non-status Indian” is a legal term referring to any First Nations individual who for whatever reason is not registered with the Federal government, and/or is not registered to a band which signed a Treaty with the Crown. This includes the Métis and explains in part why they have struggled so much in Canada to have their traditional rights recognized.

Inuit and northern First Nations). However, systemic failures to do so, in particular chronic housing need and widespread issues with water quality and sanitation, as well as policy that relinquishes treaty rights when one leaves the reserve, have entrenched poverty and dependency among many Indigenous peoples on- and off-reserve. Meanwhile, most non-status First Nations and Métis are viewed by the federal government as provincial responsibilities. These uneven geographies have only been exacerbated in recent years as reserve-urban migration among Indigenous peoples has increased significantly (Peters 2002). Additionally, the poverty rate among Indigenous children is three times that of non-Indigenous children in Canada, affecting roughly half of Indigenous children across the country (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives 2013).

Where numbered treaties were not signed, or where it has otherwise been proven in court that traditional Indigenous land rights were not extinguished, comprehensive (or “modern”) land claims agreements are open for negotiation. These modern land claims encompass a much broader range of rights and benefits, and are negotiated directly between governments. Modern land claims have been settled, or are still under negotiation, in many parts of British Columbia and across most of northern Canada. Some, but not all, claims include self-government responsibilities.

Residential school and child welfare

Many scholars have argued that intergenerational trauma as the result of colonial practices of Indigenous displacement and dispossession is indelibly tied to Indigenous experiences of homelessness in Canada (see Belanger et al. 2013; Leach 2010; Menzies 2009; Thurston and Mason 2010). In many ways, the roots of intergenerational trauma can be found in systemic practices by the State to disrupt Indigenous communities by fragmenting their families. Both the Indian Residential School System and the Canadian Child Welfare system have been highlighted as key drivers in intergenerational trauma and significant contributing factors to Indigenous homelessness.

The Indian Residential School System was one of the most tragic and destructive defining moments of colonial intervention in Canada (Thornton 2008). Beginning in the 19th century, the Canadian government developed a policy of aggressive assimilation to be implemented by residential schools, which were church-run, but funded by the federal

government. A parallel objective of this system was to facilitate the displacement of Indigenous people from their lands (De Leeuw 2009).

Attendance at the schools was mandatory, and strictly enforced by government agents. Once in the schools, few children received an adequate education. Instead, many were taught to be ashamed of their languages and cultural identities. Indigenous families were delegitimized, and the knowledge of parents and grandparents undermined by teachers and administrators (Lavallee and Poole 2010; Ruttan, LaBoucane-Benson and Munroe 2010)—all elements that gave ‘place’ to children and were integral to a sense of home (Fournier and Crey 1997). Many children were also physically and sexually abused, and disease and mortality rates were extremely high (Brasfield 2001; Degagné 2007).

A second “phase” in the removal of Indigenous children from their homes began in the 1960s, as large numbers of Indigenous children across Canada were removed from their families to be adopted by non-Indigenous families in Canada, the United States and even Europe (Kirmayer et al. 2003). This period lasted three decades, but was termed “the Sixties Scoop”, and plays a prominent role in the prevalence of trauma in Indigenous communities across Canada.

Though the overt practice of removing Indigenous children from their families for the explicit purpose of cultural assimilation has ceased, the legacy of this period is alive and well: there are currently three times more Indigenous children in state care than there ever were at the height of the residential school system (Blackstock 2003). In his research in Toronto, Canada, Menzies (2009) found that Indigenous homeless people consistently reported personal or family histories of traumatic events that resulted in the severing of ties from family or community of origin. Experiences in the child welfare system features prominently as a contributing factor to homelessness among Indigenous youth (Baskin 2007), and are often highlighted by homeless Indigenous adults as integral to their homelessness (see Christensen 2013; Menzies 2009). Researchers emphasize, however, that the factors driving the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children in the Canadian child welfare system speak to 1) the high rates of family violence and child abuse in many Indigenous communities, which are widely linked to the intergenerational impacts of colonialism; and, 2) failure on the part of the State to meaningfully and productively care for Indigenous family and community needs (Basin 2007; Fournier and Crey 1997; Warry 1998).

Several scholars have argued that Indigenous homelessness in Canada must be situated with the wider context of colonialism and rapid sociocultural change (Menzies 2007; Peters and Robillard 2009). Mental health complications, substance abuse, violence, and other factors that shape vulnerabilities to homelessness are linked to intergenerational trauma (Brasfield 2001; Hawkeye Robertson 2006). Likewise, the disproportionate number of Indigenous people in Canadian prisons is tied to intergenerational trauma and institutional racism (LaPrairie 1996; Waldram 1997), and fuels well-documented prison-to-homelessness pathways (Gaetz et al. 2009; Walsh et al. 2011). Though factors like crime, violence and substance abuse are framed by neoliberal policy as matters of individual agency, scholars have argued that for Indigenous homeless men and women in Canada, and across settler societies, individual traumas are bound up in, and further complicated by, the broader dynamics of collective, intergenerational trauma (Belanger et al. 2013; Christensen 2013).

State of knowledge on Indigenous homelessness in Canada

Across Canada, Indigenous people are overrepresented among rural and urban homeless populations (see Beavis et al. 1997; Belanger et al. 2013; Christensen 2012; Golden et al. 1999). The Native Counseling Service of Alberta estimates the rate of Indigenous homelessness to be “about 40% Canada wide” (NCSA 2000: 3), however, there is no official data on the state of Indigenous homelessness in Canada. Operationalized definitions of homelessness often fall short in any context, and this is especially so when it comes to conceptualizing and defining Indigenous homelessness (Belanger et al. 2013). Further complicating the lack of enumeration is the prevalence of both hidden homelessness and mobility in Indigenous homeless peoples’ experiences (Distasio et al. 2005). Combing through data collected by researchers in cities across Canada, Belanger et al. (2013) calculate that on any one night in Canada, 6.97 of the urban Aboriginal population is homeless, compared to the national average of .78 percent. Many community-based support providers and researcher-academics in Canada have called for a more expansive definition that accounts for the multi-dimensionality in Indigenous homeless experiences as well as the sociocultural and material conditions of “being displaced from critical community social structures and lacking in stable housing” (Menzies 2005: 8).

The history of settler and Indigenous relations and resulting settlement patterns have much to do with the high mobility of homeless Indigenous people and the inequalities that drive

it. In 2009, Peters and Robillard illustrated the socio-spatial tensions between rural reserve life and urban life, and movement between the two. In particular, they found that certain circumstances experienced by interviewees (i.e., lack of social and economic opportunities, strained relationships) often motivated them to leave rural reserves for urban areas. However, once in the city, interviewees were confronted by a lack of economic, social, and cultural resources as well as a longing for important social networks at home on the reserve. These same rural-urban disparities were noted in Bruce (2006) who argued that poor housing and depressed conditions on reserves and in remote, rural Indigenous communities leads to rural-urban migration in search of employment, educational opportunities, and better housing. Meanwhile, Christensen (2012) examined similar geographies in the homeless pathways of Indigenous homeless people in northern Canada, where high rates of chronic housing need and unemployment in northern settlements motivates or forces already-vulnerable people to leave for larger centres.

However, key to rural-urban movement in Indigenous homelessness pathways, and the experiences of Indigenous homeless people in the city, is the significance of social networks. Across all the aforementioned studies, friendship and kinship were important guiding factors in both mobility between rural and urban areas. In some cities, the urban spatialization of such social networks has resulted in the patterns of ghettoization (see Anderson 2005; Belanger 2007; Cohen and Corrado 2004).

Hidden homelessness and on-reserve/off-reserve housing

The high levels of hidden homelessness characteristic of Indigenous homelessness in Canada is makes it very difficult to accurately assess the scale and scope of the phenomenon as well as respond with effective supports (DiStasio et al. 2005). Hidden homelessness is a sweeping category and includes those in transition homes, jails and detox centres, living in overcrowded, unstable, or inadequate housing, “couch surfing”, as well as being at risk of becoming homeless. Overcrowding is a particularly common experience among those experiencing hidden homelessness, and is associated with poor mental health, respiratory problems such as tuberculosis and acute respiratory disease, domestic violence, and social strain (Clark et al. 2002; Tester 2006, 2009; Kovesi et al. 2007; Orr 2007). Indigenous peoples experiencing hidden homelessness are a very diverse group, ranging from families (especially those with single

parents), to youth and elders. Nevertheless, hidden homelessness among Indigenous people in Canada remains distinctly gendered. Indigenous women are more likely to be single parents, and almost half (47 percent) of Indigenous single parent families experience core housing need (Hulchanski 2009). Moreover, for Indigenous women, violence, poverty and housing are often closely interlinked (ibid 2009).

Overall, roughly 20 percent of Indigenous households in Canada experience core housing need, compared to non-Indigenous Canadians at 13.5 percent² (CHFC 2007). The numbers tell an even more dire story for those Indigenous households living on reserve or in Arctic Canada. Twenty-four percent of Indigenous households on-reserve are in core housing need. Meanwhile, in Nunavut and Nunavik, 40-50 percent of households are in core housing need (CMHC 2006).

Key focus areas in community-based advocacy on Indigenous homelessness in Canada

Key areas of focus for Indigenous communities, community-based advocates, and policy makers around Indigenous homelessness concern intergenerational trauma and homelessness, and supportive housing initiatives. Indigenous communities and support organizations are developing strategies that build on the wealth of strength and healing knowledge found in Indigenous cultural and spiritual frameworks and implementing those into programming and services for are homeless or at-risk of homeless. Examples can be found in several Canadian prisons (Waldram 2007), substance abuse programs geared specifically towards Indigenous peoples, such as Poundmaker Lodge near Edmonton, Alberta, and the new wellness and addictions strategy embraced by the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT 2012).

Community-based approaches that embrace Housing First or other supportive housing models that include Indigenous wellness approaches are also cropping up across Canada. Examples include Homeward Trust Edmonton which works closely with Indigenous stakeholders and community members, and maintains a majority Indigenous board and an Aboriginal Advisory Council in its effort to address Indigenous homelessness in the city. The Vancouver Native Housing Society offers similar supportive housing programs, and is also engaged in social enterprise.

² Rates of Indigenous core housing need exceed those of non-Indigenous households in every province and territory (ibid. 2007).

