

Rural Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada

Rebecca Schiff, PhD

Alina Turner, PhD

Jeannette Waegemakers Schiff, PhD

Corresponding author:

R. Schiff

Labrador Institute

PO Box 490 Stn B

Happy Valley – Goose Bay, NL

A0P 1E0

Tel: 709 896 6212 Fax: 709 896 2970

rschiff@mun.ca

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Introduction

Academic literature has most often framed the issue of homelessness as an urban phenomenon and included descriptions of aboriginal homeless persons in these descriptors. With the exception a couple of studies that focused on migration between reserves and urban centres, the experiences of those Aboriginal persons who live in small towns and outside of defined communities is unexplored. While research concurs that the over-representation of Aboriginal people among the homeless is a national issue across most parts of Canada, we do not know if this extends into rural areas. In fact, there is little research examining Canadian rural homelessness in general. Our work sets out to gain a broader understanding of the dynamics of Canadian rural homelessness in general, and a more specific understanding of ways in which homelessness is experienced by Aboriginal people in rural areas. This exploration also touches on the feasibility of Housing First approaches in rural areas. A preliminary discussion examines the varied and debated definitions of rurality as reflected in the international literature on this subject. We then move to a discussion of the existing literature on rural homelessness in Canada, followed by an examination of the available research specific to rural homelessness and Aboriginal people. Analysis of several case study locations across Canada suggest a number of new insights into the nature and dynamics of this issue.

What encompasses the description of rural in a Canadian context?

Contested notions of rurality suggest that any research or discussion of rural issues in Canada begin with a definition of the authors' context. The term rural has multiple definitions and meanings. Du Plessis and colleagues (Du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Clemenson, 2002)

identified six different definitions used by Statistics Canada. These definitions are based on the relative weighting of parameters of population size, density and context and also include consideration of the size of a territorial unit: local, community or regional. They recommend that rural be classified according to the nature and needs of a specific study or project, with parameters of zones that allow for commuting to urban areas, large or small, and those outside of commuting zones but within proximity of towns of 1,000 or more. Thus for the purposes of this research we use the term “rural” which Du Plessis and colleagues refer identify as applied to those areas falling within codes 6 – 10 of the Modified Beale Codes¹ for Canadian non-metropolitan analysis; we focus more predominantly on codes 7 – 10 which emphasize those communities that are situated within larger rural regions, and more distant from the services of large cities. Our definition includes many communities in the North although we exclude larger, northern centres which fit within Modified Beale Codes for “small city zones” such as Whitehorse, Prince George, Fort McMurray, and Yellowknife. Table 1 provides a demonstration of approximate percentage of population living in rural areas for individual provinces and territories.

Table 1: Rural populations by province/territory

Province/Territory	Rural Population (2011)	% rural population
Newfoundland and Labrador	208,970	41%
New Brunswick	356,692	48%
Nova Scotia	400, 389	43%

¹ Beale Codes were developed at the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (1975) by Charles beale to designate rural reas. They have been modified for the Canadian context by Statistics Canada.

Prince Edward Island	74,661	53%
Quebec	1,534,731	19%
Ontario	1,806,036	14%
Manitoba	333,554	28%
Saskatchewan	343,398	33%
Alberta	614,855	17%
British Columbia	609,363	14%
Yukon	13,335	39%
Northwest Territories, including Nunavut ²	33,430	46%

A caveat about existing literature

One of the first things that we noticed in the literature on rural housing and homelessness is that most articles and reports cite research that arises in other countries. There is a danger in extrapolating rural phenomenon in the UK or Australia into the Canadian context as rurality and climate are inter-connected factors that influence the lived experiences of those in specific geographic locations. Cloke, who has written extensively about rural homelessness in England, has noted a stereotype that homeless people migrate to rural areas for cheaper housing. As a result of this impression, homeless people are often blamed for bringing negative and anti-social behaviour to the community (Cloke, Milbourne, & Widdowfield, 2001).

² The latest available figures list Nunavut along with the Northwest Territories. Future demographic data will provide separate numbers for each.

In contrast, research suggests that the Canadian experience seems to be the opposite. In different parts of Canada, studies in urban contexts suggests that there is a pattern for homeless persons, including youth, to migrate to urban centres where there are services available (Christensen, 2012a), (Forchuk et al., 2010) (Gray, Chau, Huerta, & Frankish, 2011) (Karabanow, Aube, & Naylor, 2013), (Stewart & Ramage, 2011). Studies further suggest that this migratory pattern also exists for Aboriginal people who are reported to frequently move between their home reserve and urban areas (Belanger) (Peters & Robillard, 2009). This research (along with a lack of rural homelessness research in general), assumes a trajectory of rural to urban migration by those who become homeless and a nomadic pattern by Aboriginal persons (Graham & Peters, 2002) . These reports do not capture the extent to which homeless people stay in rural areas or migrate within rural areas and between rural settlements. For Aboriginal persons who prefer a rural rather than urban life-style this migration may be between reserves and local, small towns or between different reserves. There may be evidence, as we discuss later, to suggest that many homeless people, including many of Aboriginal heritage, may in fact choose to remain in rural regions, despite shortages in housing, health and social services.

The extent of homelessness in different parts of rural Canada is simply unknown. Several investigators have reflected on this paucity of information in the extent of rural homelessness, noting that methodological issues of data collection make this an almost impossible challenge. In urban settings, most of those who are homeless seek some support services, ranging from food at a soup kitchen or food bank to overnight shelter and social assistance for financial help. While some “sleep rough”, out of doors, most can be counted in

regular “sweeps” by trained volunteers. Rural people, by virtue of their location, usually do not have a place to congregate unless they move to a town or city that has identified services for those who lack housing. It has been postulated by researchers in the U.S. that housing insecurity may be as ubiquitous as it is in urban settings and proportionately speaking, homeless rates may be even higher than in urban areas (Lawrence, 1995). When those living in substandard or unfit housing are included, number of persons facing housing insecurity and at high risk of homelessness in rural areas is probably higher than in urban settings. In fact it has been noted that houses routinely condemned in urban areas fall outside of the view of local officials in rural areas and remain inhabited despite their unsafe condition (M. J. Robertson & Toro, 1999). In addition, the widespread use of mobile homes in trailer parks found favour in and around many small communities and outlying areas throughout Canada beginning in the 1970’s. Many of these dwelling units were not intended for long-term survival in the harsh Canadian winters. Coupled with lack of maintenance, many are now falling into a dilapidated and unsafe state, but continue to be occupied by those who lack other affordable accommodations. These units are at high risk for becoming uninhabitable in the next five years and there is no mechanism to help these owners and renters to replace their homes.

In a review of literature on the homeless in the U.S., Robertson noted that researchers generally concluded that those who are homeless in rural America are most often the hidden homeless – doubled up or couch surfing with friends or family (M. J. Robertson & Toro, 1999). While these conclusions arise from localized reports rather than strong data gathering evidence bases, they have a face validity that leads many to accept these conclusions. Thus the descriptor of rural homelessness as largely an invisible phenomenon has arisen. Many rural

homeless live with family, and friends, moving from place to place as their welcome wears thin. They may live in dwellings considered substandard or not fit for human habitation (M. J. Robertson & Toro, 1999), (Hilton & DeJong, 2010). Their home may be a travel trailer or car or abandoned bus. This 'hiddenness' may for some also be seasonal, with visibility rising during warmer months. For example, in many rural towns such as Kenora and Happy-Valley Goose Bay, homeless persons are visibly camped in or near town during milder weather (Falvo, 2011), a visible reminder of their lack of shelter or housing.

When we narrow our examination to the literature that focuses on homelessness in Canada, peer reviewed publications provide few answers to our questions. We located a handful of peer-reviewed articles that could be considered to encompass rural homeless issues. Five of these, (Belanger) (Christensen, 2012b) (Forchuk et al., 2010), (Gray et al., 2011), (Peters & Robillard, 2009) focussed on urban/rural migration patterns. Of these, articles by Belanger and Peters & Robillard examined Aboriginal migratory patterns in Western Canada, detailing reasons why Aboriginal persons leave and return to their reserves. A detailed study by Christensen examined rural and migratory patterns in the far North, encompassing both Aboriginal and Inuit persons (Christensen, 2012b). The results of these investigations are reported elsewhere in this book. Other studies were not specific to Aboriginal people. Forchuk's examination of rural to urban transitions was restricted to persons with a history of serious mental illness in south western Ontario as they sought services and supports while coping with their disabilities (Forchuk et al., 2010). Gray looked at the migratory patterns of a group of primarily single men who were absolutely homeless as they transitioned from rural British Columbia to Vancouver (Gray et al., 2011) . While both the works by Forchuk and Gray

are important in topic, their views of homelessness are restricted to areas with a relatively milder climate, closer proximity to urban areas than other parts of the country and concentrated on distinct groups of persons with identified disabilities and need for support services who are only part of the overall homeless population. Finally, it is dubious if Gray's work could be considered as including a rural component as Kelowna is a city of over 120,000 and, while some regions adjacent to the city are rural, the focus of the study in the city itself does not fit the parameters that define rural in most commonly accepted descriptions.

Given the paucity of Canadian-based peer-reviewed articles, we expanded the search to include the grey literature; reports and research undertaken for Service Canada, HRDSC and CMHC, as well as those commissioned by local advisory boards and homeless consortiums that serve largely rural communities, including those considered northern and remote. Notably missing are reports that examine housing and homelessness in rural Quebec and Manitoba.

This expanded source of information provided valuable information on the view of homelessness in select rural areas of the country as many provided description of specific rural areas and communities. In some instances it also provided a few indicators of Aboriginal homeless persons in rural areas.

Commissioned reports

Some of the best descriptors of rural homelessness outside of a metropolitan commuting zone come from the Kootenay region of southern BC, (Glass, 2002), northern BC (Halseth & Ryser, 2010), Happy Valley-Goose Bay (HVGB), NL (Lee, Budgell, & Skinner, 2007) and Schiff (Schiff, Connors, & O'Brien, 2012), rural PEI (Smith & Fuller, 2007), and rural Nova

Scotia (K. Robertson & White, 2007). Collectively they provide a fairly consistent picture of lack of affordable housing, subsidized housing, low income, and lack of support services as main factors in homelessness in these areas. Homeless and at high risk of homelessness persons reported paying well over 30% of their income and in many instances upwards of 50% of their income for housing (Glass, 2002) (K. Robertson & White, 2007) (Schiff et al., 2012). In some instances, such as HVGB, a sheer lack of any available housing is driving prices both for market homes and rental housing up beyond affordability levels for most local residents (Schiff et al., 2012). As in other rural and remote areas, incomes are reportedly lower than in many urban communities, while food and utility costs are substantially higher. In addition to lack of housing, many rural buildings that are more than 30 years old are in need of substantial repairs, with a noticeable number failing to meet minimal health and safety standards. Glass (Glass, 2002) provides some excellent descriptions of housing that has no electricity, running water, is mold infested and violates safety standards as reported by over one third of his research participants. In most cases owners either fail to qualify for financing to improve their homes or the residents are tenants with building owners reluctant to spend money on rehabilitation (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), 2012; Statistics Canada, 2014) .

In these communities mental health and addiction problems are recognized as propelling some people into homelessness. However, substance abuse, with the exception of alcohol, is generally not reported at rates as high as in urban settings. Thus a significant pathway to housing loss in urban areas, the abuse of illegal substances and resultant loss of employment, income and housing, are reported as significant but not necessarily as primary in rural areas. However, for those who struggle with addictions or mental illness, lack of treatment

and support services are scarce and there is little (or none, depending on the location) of supportive housing (Glass, 2002) (Grodzinski, Londerville, & Sutherns, 2013) (Stewart & Ramage, 2011) .

A significant precipitant of housing loss is experienced by women, with and without dependants, who are victims of domestic abuse. Domestic violence and marital breakup are more frequently mentioned as psycho-social stressors that lead to homelessness. Those without a place to live most often double up. Youth will couch surf with friends and relatives during winter months and seek summer camps and camping in warmer months. One detailed report of homelessness in the Kootnenays (Glass, 2002) provided some detailed descriptors that coloured the uniqueness of rural homelessness:

Another rural issue was the challenge faced when marriages or relationships break down. As a single adult, particularly with children, the challenges of rural living can be serious, especially in smaller communities. Gathering firewood, tending produce, repairing machinery, and feeding animals amongst other activities can be particularly arduous when only one adult is doing it. One woman commented (after separating from her husband) that she no longer had access to the tools (truck, chainsaw etc.) to collect firewood (p. 50).

And...

Two other distinctly rural themes were evident. One was the scenario, at least in some communities, of 'established families' and networks (the "whom you now" scenario).

Several mentioned that it was whom you knew that really helped in obtaining work or satisfactory housing (iv).

The Stewart and Ramage report on northern Ontario covers communities north of Sudbury (including Thunder Bay) and addresses some additional factors. The territory encompassed is vast and scattered with few metro areas. The report listed the most pressing issues described by providers in relation to homelessness across Northern Ontario (Stewart & Ramage, 2011). The theme running through most of the items listed is one of poverty, with psychosocial issues of poor mental health, addictions and lack of education/job skills as contributory but not necessarily the primary causes of housing insufficiency. Transportation, which is frequently mentioned, needs also to be viewed as a poverty related issue, as those with financial means own their own vehicle; a factor which is usually necessary for access to services and employment in rural regions. It is the poor and disabled who most frequently need to rely on public transportation, which is rarely available in those areas.

Overall, the reports provide some evidence that homelessness in rural areas may exist may be more pervasive and dynamic than previously thought. There is discussion of widespread issues of housing affordability and suitability, mental health and addictions issues, domestic violence, and other significant factors precipitating homelessness and severely marginalised housing situations. While much of the evidence in the reports points to hidden homelessness, there is also consistent discussion of absolute homelessness, indicating that there may be a cohort of individuals and families who choose to remain in rural locations despite lack of shelter.

Reports on Rural Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada

Reports and academic articles concur on the over-representation of aboriginal people among the homeless in Canada. Some also note that research on this topic is scarce. A small body of literature contains some discussion of rural homelessness among Aboriginal people, usually as anecdotal to the main focus of the report. Many of the commissioned works which focused on small communities and rural areas make reference to the representation of Aboriginal people among the general rural homeless population. However, discussion of trends, precipitating factors, and approaches to addressing homelessness are often generalised and rarely encompass those issues specific to the experiences of Aboriginal people. On the other hand, the majority of the academic literature in this area has most often been framed in terms of urban homelessness (Christensen, 2012b); (Hanselman, 2001); (Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, 2012); (Schiff & Waagemakers Schiff, 2010); (Turner et al., 2010) ; (Walker, 2008); (Distasio, Sylvestre, & Mulligan, 2005).

Another major component of this literature has focussed on migration between reserves and urban centres (Belanger); (Christensen, 2012b) ; (Peters & Robillard, 2009). These works suggest that the natural impetus is for those who leave the reserve to relocate to a major urban area. That may be true for a proportion of those who do not want to remain on their home reserve, but may not be the choice of all who leave. Little is reported on the plight of aboriginal people who choose to remain close to, but not on, their home reserves and live in rural Canada. One of the challenges of many of the existing reports that focus on Canada's larger cities is the assumption that there is no stopping place for people leaving the reserve and

thus they largely seek big city life and its services. However, there is no data to support this assumption. Later in this chapter we reflect on anecdotal reports from small towns adjacent to reserves that have a significant Aboriginal population.

There is also a body of literature which discusses housing issues on-reserve. Most Aboriginal reserves are located away from major urban centres (the T'su Tina reserve adjacent to Calgary and the St, Mary's Reserve adjacent to Fredericton are notable examples of exceptions). Because of their location, most reserves would be considered to be rural and often remote as well. Housing issues and homelessness on-reserve are significant issues requiring their own attention (Belanger); (Hill, 2010). On-reserve housing issues have been mentioned in the literature for a number of years and are frequently reported in the media as in the extensive coverage in 2012 – 2013 of housing conditions on Attawapiskat First Nation reserve in Northern Ontario. Poor housing conditions were mentioned as a significant concern in a literature review by Beavis et al of Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada on 1997 (Beavis, Klos, Carter, & Douchant, 1997). Recently Hill (Hill, 2010) in a comprehensive review of past and current housing policies and practices, noted vast inadequacies in the amount and quality of housing available on most of Canadian Aboriginal reserves. Supply of housing falls far short of what is needed to house those living on reserves. Included in Hill's report was the serious problem of substandard housing that was built by government contractors in the 1950's and 1960's, which has resulted in a wide-spread housing crisis as lack of repairs and upgrading have made this housing stick dilapidated, sub-standard and often hazardous to inhabit (p.4). This has exacerbated the lack of adequate reserve-based housing. The lack of housing supply on reserves has also been exacerbated by the rapid increase in the aboriginal population, many of

whom (54%) continue to live on the reserve (Hill, 2010). The current result is that many families are doubled up, with reports of 10 to 18 persons in a 3 bed-room dwelling intended for a family of four or five, several families living in one house and many forced to live in units not considered acceptable housing by any standards (Hill, 2010).

Although we emphasize our recognition of the severity and complexity of on-reserve housing issues, our focus examines the context of these issues as they impact the complex relationships between rural towns and nearby reserves. As Distasio and colleagues indicate, there is a virtual non-existence (and need for) research and literature which examines Aboriginal homelessness specifically in off-reserve rural areas (i.e. not within a larger context of urban homelessness) (Distasio et al., 2005). We thus set out to begin a preliminary examination of Aboriginal peoples' experiences of rural homelessness in Canada.

Case study analysis of rural Aboriginal homelessness

The literature on Aboriginal and rural homelessness points to a need for more than examination of singular or isolated experiences. We thus set out to learn more about Aboriginal peoples' rural homelessness experiences through multiple case examination across Canada. Case study research included review of relevant documents as well as semi-structured interviews with homelessness experts from rural communities across Canada's provinces and territories. Representatives were identified either through the researchers' professional networks or by examining government reports or newspaper articles regarding rural homelessness to identify agencies or individuals who could speak knowledgeably about the subject. Most participants in the study worked in non-profit or government positions in the

homelessness or broader social services sector. In communities lacking formal homelessness infrastructure, respondents were also volunteer leaders, often from the faith community. This study was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB).

This research was included as part of a larger study on rural homelessness in Canada commissioned by the Human Resources and Skills Development Homelessness Partnering Secretariat. The original focus of the study was to examine the feasibility of a housing first approach to homelessness in rural areas. Communities were selected based on their status according to the Modified Beale Codes (with an aim for diversity across codes) and to ensure appropriate representation from across diverse Canadian rural geographies. This resulted in representation from every province or territory, with communities ranging in size and remoteness. What we present here is a selection of this cohort, representing this diversity of rural areas (catchment communities and their surrounding regions) which spoke explicitly to issues of homelessness among Aboriginal people in the region. We focus on case study results gathered at: Camrose, AB; Kenora, ON; Smithers, BC; Pincher Creek, AB; Happy Valley – Goose Bay, NL and; Old Crow, YK. Camrose, Alberta

Camrose is a town of about 17,000 residents located in central Alberta. It is within 100 kilometers of Edmonton and 300 kilometers of Calgary, placing it at 6 under the modified Beale Codes classification. As a result of macro-economic factors impacting the region, demand for housing grew in tandem with the 2005/6 economic boom fueled by oil and gas industry growth

in Alberta. Rents rose dramatically while vacancies shrank. In fact, the housing conditions in Camrose were as strained as those reported by Fort MacMurray at the height of the boom. The economic downturn in 2009 did result in some relief on vacancies, however rents remain too high for those in the low paid jobs. Lack of new rental being built and poor housing conditions of existing stock are cited as the main drivers of hidden homelessness in the community.

Homelessness in Camrose is generally hidden rather than characterized by rough sleeping or a large emergency shelter population common in larger urban centres. Most homeless are doubled up with friends and family or in unsafe housing conditions. A dramatic rise in homelessness is reported in the area starting in 2005. The interviewee noted that homelessness had been an issue before this period, however, the needs of Camrosians could be met with 2-3 rooms managed by existing non-profit providers in the area. As of 2005, more demand for shelter led to the opening of a new facility.

Camrose is an excellent example of the influence of neighboring reserves on the homeless population. About 5% of the Camrose population is Aboriginal, however, they are reported to make up about 20% of the homeless. Proximity to several First Nations communities is reported to make an impact on homelessness locally. Hobbema's difficult and poor on-reserve housing conditions and social issues are spurring migration, although this is only impacting some of the local homelessness problem. Seasonality seems to impact occupancy at the local homeless shelter with more demand reported in conjunction with worsening weather conditions. There is no specific action plan in place or under development to address homelessness at this time. The interviewee noted that there is limited public

understanding that homelessness is an issue outside of social sector. In 2009, the City developed a social development strategy, however this did not identify homelessness as an issue. Affordable housing was noted however.

Kenora, Ontario

Kenora is a town in northwestern Ontario with a population of approximately 15,438. It lies well outside of the commuting zones of Thunder Bay and Winnipeg which are the two closest metropolitan areas. This places the town at 7 under the modified Beale Codes classification. It is the main municipality of the region and serves as a regional service centre. As a result, there courts and comprehensive medical supports are located there. The Aboriginal population of the town is pegged at 15.8% and there are eight First Nation reserves close by, some of which have experienced considerable hardship in recent years.

Kenora is experiencing homelessness, particularly visible street homelessness, characterised by an over-representation of Aboriginal people sleeping rough and in shelter facilities. Kenora has a dry shelter where 14-23 homeless stay on nightly basis. Another 9-17 rough sleepers are reported as well on an annual basis.

Homelessness, particularly among Aboriginal people, is an issue for several of the northern communities in the Kenora district - in particular Pickle Lake (pop. 425), which is located next door to Mishkeegogamang First Nation. Red Lake (pop. 4,336) experiences homelessness issues as well and also serves as a gateway to the North for First Nations. Sioux-Lookout (pop. approximately 5,000) is another community where homelessness is visible. It is a

site where the Local Health Integration Network delivers service and where a new hospital was built, hence another gateway city serving 29 northern First Nations. These three smaller centres are close to reserves and attract migration from northern communities. Once migrants arrive, they may not return for a number of reasons: some include missing appointments and therefore being ineligible for funds to return home; in other cases they may face banishment from their home community. Although these communities may offer fewer services than larger urban centres, many choose to stay or migrate no further than Kenora in order to stay close to their home communities, relatives, friends, cultures, and support networks.

Smithers, British Columbia

Another community that is influenced by neighboring reserves is Smithers, BC. This small town has about 5,000 residents, of whom approximately 10% are identified as Aboriginal. Its services' catchment area is estimated to be as high as 30,000, but the number of Aboriginal persons in the catchment area is unknown. It is located in northwestern British Columbia approximately half way between the larger communities of Prince George and Prince Rupert, although well outside of their commuting zones. It is placed at 7 under the modified Beale Codes classification. Smithers has been known as a region that attracts residents because of its natural beauty. As a result, housing prices are high and vacancies are low. This places significant pressure on low income households, especially those with limited social assistance incomes and experiencing additional barriers, such as mental health issues and addictions.

Locally, social service organizations provide a range of housing and supports, including shelter, transitional and affordable housing, as well as child and youth services, transportation,

and a domestic violence shelter. In a small town, there is the added barrier of landlords spreading the word about tenants who damage units. This creates a blacklist of names who are denied units consistently. The local emergency shelter offers 9 spots per night and reports a 60% average occupancy. Interestingly, the interviewee reports the number of users decreases in the winter despite concerns and expectations that the opposite would be the case. The hypothesis is that knowing the danger of the cold, individuals figure out doubling up or other strategies instead of sleeping rough through the winter period.

In terms of local needs, an estimated 250 people are believed to experience homelessness annually. Of these, about 12-17 are considered to be chronic requiring very intensive housing and supports. Another 50 are believed to require some wrap-around supports once rehoused. Another 150 are believed to be women escaping violence. Most of the clients served are reported to be Aboriginal (95%) and informants attributed this to the proximity of the 1,200 person Wet'suwet'en First Nation near the town. Smithers is also reportedly absorbing some of the needs that spills over from migration and housing instability in the coastal community of Kitimat. The experience here clearly indicates a degree of migration between rural communities as well as between reserves and nearby rural towns.

Happy Valley/Goose Bay, Labrador

Happy Valley/Goose Bay (HVGB), Labrador is a rural and remote northern community; rural because its size of approximately 7,500 inhabitants classifies it as a small town, remote

because it is over 1000 km over mostly unpaved road and by ferry to the nearest urban area, Corner Brook, with a population of about 20,000. It is placed at 10 under the modified Beale Codes classification. Exhaustive reports on homelessness in the HVGB area in 2007 and 2012 provide more detail than available in the other communities that we studied. Because of the unique remote, rural yet also service centre characteristics of the area we explore it in greater detail.

HVGB is a predominantly Aboriginal community which also acts as a regional service centre with medical and social services for the extended rural, and mostly Aboriginal communities of central Labrador and the Labrador coast. It is the home of a Canadian Forces airbase and this has provided a long-time economic stabilizing force in the community. Recent mineral and energy explorations have resulted in an upsurge of development activities that is rapidly increasing the town population and creating a strain on local resources, especially housing and related services. The socio-economic profile and demographics of HVGB are similar to other service centres in the “provincial norths”, such as La Ronge and Thompson, suggesting that comparable experiences with homelessness or housing issues might also exist in those regions. While outside the scope of this study, it is suggested that further research is needed to determine the extent of such issues in small and remote service centre communities.

In 2007 the Happy Valley-Goose Bay Community Advisory Board on Housing and Homelessness developed a Community Plan (Plan) for Addressing Homelessness and Transitional Housing. The town recently completed a revised report on housing and homelessness (2012). As a result there is a significant amount of community awareness and

acknowledgement of housing and homeless problems in the area. The report notes the following:

....service providers and decision makers saw housing as an issue for many people in HVGB regardless of income level. There is a persistent concern surrounding the lack of affordable and available housing in general particularly in the rental market. Also articulated was the need for additional transitional and emergency housing as well as supportive housing for people with multiple and complex needs.

Homelessness in HVGB is hidden, often characterized by overcrowding, couch-surfing, boarding houses, and violence.....the housing situation in the town has worsened. This is largely attributed to permanent and temporary migration from the coast of Labrador as well as an escalation in rental rates and house prices due to anticipated industrial activity in the region.

HVGB is also experiencing an upsurge in absolute homelessness. Stakeholders report anywhere from 15 to 30 people per night sleeping outdoors in the town centre during the spring, summer, autumn seasons. During the coldest months many rough sleepers will couch surf, double up with friends or family, return to abusive households, sleep in cars, other vehicles, and shelters not fit for habitation, e.g. garages and sheds. However, a few remain outdoors, camped in tents or other makeshift shelters outside of town. Reports indicate that most homeless people in HVGB (85 - 95%) are Aboriginal.

Homelessness is exacerbated in HVGB by its location and function as a regional centre for central and coastal Labrador. Many persons come to town from the nearby First Nation and

coastal Inuit communities seeking medical and other services. They often remain in the area for various reasons but lack adequate accommodation. This is a similar dynamic to that reported by Stewart and Ramage in northern Ontario (Stewart & Ramage, 2011). Stakeholders in HVGB also report that most people experiencing housing issues do not go to Corner Brook, St. John's or other larger urban centres. They prefer to stay in Labrador, close to family, friends, familiar surroundings and culture. Those who do go to St. John's or other cities usually have a history of travel to the city for medical services. However, they often find the experience of living in a city quite different than "visiting" the city and many choose to relocate to smaller communities or return to Labrador. One exception exists to this reported trend: those who go to metropolitan areas for residential substance abuse treatment usually do not return.

Homelessness is recognized as a significant social problem by provincial and municipal government as well as the general public. Past homeless and housing reports from HVGB (Lee et al., 2007) (Schiff et al., 2012) emphasize the need for affordable housing, with a mix of publicly funded and private market units. While mental health and addictions are acknowledged as important issues, they are not singled out as the primary causes of homelessness for many persons. These reports note the dire condition of many rural housing units and that this situation continues to deteriorate. A few organisations in town provide supportive and affordable housing. There is a "housing support worker", funded by the provincial government, who works with local service providers in providing support and locating housing for people who are homeless. Through fundraising conducted by the local housing and homelessness coalition, the housing support worker maintains an emergency fund to pay for emergency accommodation for homeless persons.

Housing First is cited as a philosophy of housing. As a programmatic approach it requires staffing a resources usually not available in rural contexts. The lack of affordable or social housing units, combined with the lack of resources to support an ACT or ICM team, makes practical implementation extremely challenging. Similar issues related to lack of affordable housing stock and lack of resources to support ACT or ICM teams are seen across the rural communities included in this study.

Old Crow, Yukon

Old Crow is an isolated Aboriginal community of approximately 240 persons, located about 75 km north of the Arctic circle and about 100 km from the Beaufort Sea. There are no roads to Old Crow and most travel, apart from local trips to traditional hunting camps, is by airplane. The community is placed at 10 under the modified Beale Codes classification. The community is a Aboriginal community, but not a reserve, comprised almost entirely of Vuntut Gwitchin people who have inhabited this area for thousands of years. Contact with non-Aboriginal people has existed for over 100 years and began with hunters and missionaries. Because of its remoteness, communication, including telephone and internet, is by satellite service and is intermittent as weather conditions frequently interfere with reception. As the town has no high school, all secondary education is provided in Whitehorse and thus adolescents spend considerable parts of their teenage years in a more urban environment.

Most residents live in log homes built many years ago, or in more recently constructed government housing. However, the housing stock is in need of repair and upgrading, and is

insufficient for the size of the community. As with many northern settlements, government housing is often poorly designed in relation to cultural aspects of shelter use and cannot respond to environments and the impacts of climate change. Lack of adequate housing is an ongoing problem and is exacerbated when domestic conflict or interpersonal problems necessitate that family living units split up. There is very limited alternative living space available.

Those who are homeless usually “couch surf” with friends or relatives during the cold weather months, and live off the land while the temperature is moderate. Those who are sent to Whitehorse for incarceration or psychiatric treatment often return to town with no appropriate accommodation arranged. The hardships this imposes on individuals and those who provide temporary shelter are compounded by limitations of availability and cost of food. Those who live off the land still require basic supplies which are costly and must be flown in. This creates a problem of food sufficiency for those who are dispossessed. Individuals and families who lack housing cannot, as in other regions, easily migrate to the nearest urban center, as it requires a plane ride and thus the resources to fund this travel.

There is no formal acknowledgement of a problem with homelessness, and no official plan to address this issue. Those who are without shelter are usually housed temporarily at the RCMP station, the nursing station or in the local town hall. These arrangements generally last only for a couple of days until a community member or family offers shelter. Recently several new dwellings have been erected, but they do not present an adequate response to a pressing issue of housing sufficiency, adequacy, climatic and cultural appropriateness.

Discussion

The current body of literature related to rural Aboriginal homelessness in Canada is for the most part derived either from reports on rural homelessness in general or academic literature which most often frames this issues in terms of urban homelessness. There is little which reports on the plight of Aboriginal people who choose to live in off-reserve in rural areas. Additionally, many existing reports indicate that those who leave reserves find no stopping place in rural areas and that they largely seek big city life and its services. Our case study analysis reveals that this may not always be the predominant trend and points to some additional factors related to this issue not yet covered in the literature. These findings also provide a basis for some preliminary recommendations on addressing rural Aboriginal homelessness.

Absolute and hidden rural homelessness among Aboriginal people

Absolute and hidden homelessness are a reality for many rural communities. Not all of communities included in our larger study (on Canadian rural homelessness in general) reported overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the homeless population. However, the presence of Aboriginal communities near a case study community was generally correlated with an overrepresentation in the homeless population. This trend also indicated that, despite severe housing problems and racism among landlords or service providers, many Aboriginal people remain in rural areas rather than migrate to larger urban centres.

Migration within and between rural communities

In many locations which are adjacent or relatively close to large urban centres (e.g. Camrose, AB) many people will choose to migrate directly from their home community to the city. In some other communities (e.g. Pincher Creek, AB) issues of racism may prevent people from settling, forcing migration to other rural communities or to the closest urban area. However, this is not the case for all rural areas and migration does not just occur between Aboriginal communities and urban centres. Some choose to stay close to reserve or land claims areas. This is especially the case in more isolated regions, (e.g. Kenora, Happy Valley – Goose Bay, Smithers, Old Crow) where travel to the city might be avoided due to more distant separation from their land, family, friends and culture. These rural and remote “service centre” communities are especially impacted, acting as catchments where people do not move on to large cities. In these towns, findings suggest that the rarer occurrence of migration to cities is usually precipitated by a history of travel to those locations for medical, court, or other services. The challenges of city life may lead many to relocate to smaller communities or return to their home region. However, it appears that those who go to metropolitan areas for residential substance abuse treatment often do not return, usually because many report that after-care services are unavailable, and the return home may precipitate relapse as it is associated with substance using people and places.

Migration from Aboriginal communities is motivated by a number of factors, including poor housing conditions on-reserve, lack of employment and education opportunities, as well as the need to access services (medical, judiciary, counselling, etc.). Often, smaller centres,

regardless of their local economic growth, remain magnets for Aboriginal populations who lack access to such services in their own communities. Others choose to leave their home community due to domestic violence and disputes. Notably, the movement between different reserves for this reason is very common and some residents will migrate regularly.

Racism and rural Aboriginal homelessness

Landlord discrimination against Aboriginal tenants was consistently reported across the case study sites. This is particularly an issue in areas experiencing a strained housing market, and further exacerbates the over-representation of Aboriginal people in local homeless populations. In areas such as HVGB and Kenora, where a high number of Aboriginal communities and reserves exist near the town, this is even more visible given that the majority of homeless people are reported to be Aboriginal. However, in some areas, such as Pincher Creek, First Nations people are discouraged from using town services and encouraged to “find their way down the highway” to Lethbridge or Calgary.

Rural Service System Responses

Rural communities face numerous challenges in addressing homelessness and marginal housing conditions. Not only are emergency shelter options limited; most communities experience a significant lack of affordable and social housing infrastructure. A limited social services sector infrastructure also precipitates and aggravates rural homelessness. Due to funding allocation based on population size, many communities are additionally limited in their access to federal and provincial funding for affordable housing and homelessness. For similar reasons, federal homelessness planning and systems level supports are usually focused on large

urban centres, such that rural communities have limited access to such opportunities. All of this leads to challenges to implementing Housing First initiatives to address homelessness and affordable housing in rural communities, which in turn impact capacity to address Aboriginal homelessness in rural areas.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The over-representation of Aboriginal people amongst homeless populations in certain rural communities points to the need to recognize the factors engendering ongoing housing instability for this group on and off reserve. The capacity of small communities to absorb the needs of Aboriginal migrants without additional funding is limited and further entrenches disparities. The findings of this study lead to the following four recommendations which are proposed to facilitate responses to homelessness among Aboriginal people in rural communities.

Dismantling racism

In most communities, homelessness and marginalised housing is aggravated by racism. In some areas, it is reported that strong racism pervades the region and keeps Aboriginal people from town, except for access to basic needs such as groceries. For all other services, Aboriginal people in these regions will turn to larger urban centres where they can find Aboriginal-run organisations, and others which support cultural competence. Ultimately, there is an urgent need to address ongoing issues of racism which exacerbate rural Aboriginal homelessness and unintended migration to urban areas. This calls for investment in dismantling racism programs, education, awareness campaigns.

Capacity building and support for systems planning in rural communities

This study demonstrated the variable extent to which rural communities possess the capacity to systematically address housing and homelessness. While some sites have had the benefit of learnings through participation in federal initiatives and networks, to enhance understanding of homelessness responses, most are largely left on their own. Further, capacity building resources are usually intended for urban centres, where homelessness is most often visible. In general, there is an urgent need for improvements to existing units and construction of new stock to meet the expansive need for affordable, social, and supportive housing. More support is also needed across rural Canada for systems planning to address homelessness in general, as well as rural Aboriginal homelessness and the housing dynamics between reserves and rural towns. Resources on undertaking performance management and system planning, managing emergency shelters and other system of care components, and on adapting Housing First or other approaches, should be tailored to the needs of smaller centres. Adaptations to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal people should be developed in these specific contexts.

Developing and supporting Housing First with rural adaptations

Findings of this study also point to challenges related to the application of Housing First approaches in rural communities. It is suggested that there is a need to rethink such strategies for rural regions and especially for Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness in rural communities. We also found some evidence that, even where rural Housing First programs did exist, there was little to no uptake by Aboriginal clients. Interviewees who participated in the

national Mental Health Commission At Home/Chez Soi pilot study of Housing First in indicated that no Aboriginal people participated in the study's only rural pilot site in New Brunswick, despite the existence for demand for such supports. Housing First

Another finding, particular to Old Crow and communities of similar size, is that there are no social housing programs and no congregate living arrangements. Thus these communities echo a prevailing northern wisdom that Housing First is actually an Arctic survival theme – one must have adequate shelter for survival – and not a description of a specific housing approach. This is in contrast to a specific program model of housing for persons with a mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse which is also called “housing first”. From the case communities involved in this research, strict Housing First program adoption following the Pathways “housing first” model Tsemberis (Tsemberis, 2010) is likely to be either extremely challenging or completely unfeasible. This is due to a number of barriers for rural communities in general: lack of funding for a relatively costly program, lack of access to market housing units, and challenges hiring trained mental health and addictions program staff, and lack of psychiatrist availability for treatment and support, . For Aboriginal people in these communities, issues of racism complicate these challenges. There is also a need to understand the lack of uptake of Housing First by Aboriginal people in rural communities as evidenced by the At Home/Chez Soi experience in rural New Brunswick. ICM is a likelier option than ACT, though the severe lack of suitable housing stock, program funding, and racism would remain a challenge. These program types would require adaptation to overcome these barriers.

Adapting Housing First also requires recognition that rural homelessness in general is not as pervasively characterised by the visible, chronic homelessness for which ACT and ICM teams are designed. Relatively small numbers of such eligible clients exist on a community basis (in some cases 2-3 chronic homelessness are reported in a locality); homelessness is largely hidden and potential clients exhibit a range of acuities. The ability to develop separate programs to target each acuity type (ACT, ICM, Rapid Rehousing, System Navigation, etc.) we see in larger centres would not be feasible, or necessarily desirable, in smaller communities. In this sense, Housing First programs would need to have the capacity to manage diverse client needs at once or use a regional approach to providing targeted services simply to achieve efficiencies of scale. This would also leverage the centres that operate in this fashion already, serving smaller communities throughout a particular region.

To overcome the lack of funding and/access to mental health, medical and addictions support, communities could also develop telehealth options to deliver support to clients. This could be combined with case managers that provided in-house, wrap around supports, then leveraged the medical expertise using technology. Such an approach has been adopted in the state of Vermont (US) (Stefancic et al., 2013), but the vast remoteness of the Canadian rural landscape with attendant challenges of reliable access to the internet make this a solution for some but not all areas. Clients would have to have access to the internet to enable this option - and some communities in remote areas would be excluded due to lack of consistent internet access. Where this is a viable option, it should be explored further.

Engaging private sector landlords in solutions will also require marketing to this group, particularly given the small number operating rental in these communities. Supporting

advocates and providers with materials to educate small scale landlords about working with homeless populations, and aimed at dismantling racism, can assist further in the implementation of Housing First.

Comprehensive research on rural homelessness.

To date, attempts at capturing rural Aboriginal homelessness trends have been largely localized on one community or region or framed in terms of urban migration. While this study aimed to develop a comparative view of the issue across Canada, it was intended as a preliminary effort rather than comprehensive analysis of the issue. To this end, a final recommendation is the implementation of a fulsome research agenda on rural Aboriginal homelessness be developed to capture common emerging themes from a national rather than community by community perspective. A number of local needs assessments and strategic plans were located during the course of the study; future research should leverage this information to enhance analysis.

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