ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

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Executive Summary

Canada has a national Aboriginal homelessness crisis. Homelessness in the general population has risen in the past few decades, and the problem is well-documented in research. Canada's growing homelessness and poverty are recognized by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which asked the Canadian government to report on Canada's progress annually instead of every four years.[1]

Aboriginal people are over-represented in the homelessness population. For example, in the 2005 Greater Vancouver Homeless Count, thirty per cent of homeless people identified as Aboriginal, though Aboriginal people make up only two per cent of the general population. Similar situations exist in Victoria, Prince George, Kelowna, and throughout British Columbia and Canada. This national crisis demands a national strategy, and funds dedicated to addressing homelessness must be dedicated to Aboriginal needs in the same proportion that Aboriginal people are represented in the homeless population.

Because Aboriginal people in British Columbia have a unique history, the Aboriginal homelessness crisis is unique, and it requires a unique solution. The Aboriginal homelessness problem requires Aboriginal leadership. Canada needs a federal task force that oversees and coordinates the many programs working to address this issue, oversees data collection and analysis, ensures culturally appropriate approaches so that the most vulnerable people are not alienated from services, and disperses funding. British Columbia needs a similar task force to perform these tasks at a provincial level.

This paper outlines the current literature, including the homelessness crisis in Canada, Aboriginal homelessness and current programs. It then puts forward lessons that can be taken from past experiences, presents AHMA's position on the issue and proposes next steps.

Aboriginal homelessness in Canada

Federal and provincial cuts to housing and other social programs in the eighties, combined with rapid growth in residential real estate values, led to a homelessness crisis in the nineties. This crisis is extremely costly for Canadians. Each homeless person in British Columbia costs federal, provincial and municipal governments an estimated $55,000 per year for expenses such as emergency services, health care, social services, and involvement with the justice system. These expenditures have done nothing to reduce homelessness, which continues to increase. By contrast, it costs $37,000 per year to connect a B.C. homeless person with housing and appropriate support, a strategy that gets individuals and families permanently off the streets.

Aboriginal people are the demographic most vulnerable to homelessness in Canada. Aboriginal people constitute less than four per cent of the Canadian population but over ten per cent of the national homeless population. Aboriginal homeless are overrepresented in all major cities. In some cities, more than seventy per cent of the homeless are Aboriginal. Aboriginal Canadians are not only more likely to become homeless but also less likely to use shelters and other support services and more likely to remain homeless.

The Aboriginal homelessness crisis correlates with the Aboriginal history of colonization, residential schools, wardship in the child welfare system, and marginalization. In addition to historical factors, the existing structure of unemployment, discrimination, patriarchy,

displacement, and the reserve system contributes to the extensiveness of the Aboriginal homelessness problem, as does the disproportionate vulnerability of Aboriginal Canadians to family instability, addictions, fetal alcohol syndrome, poor health, and social disconnection. Hidden Aboriginal homelessness in rural areas contributes to urban Aboriginal homelessness, as movement between reserves and rural areas becomes a circular pattern.

Government programs

Beginning in the late nineties, the federal government attempted to address the homelessness crisis through new funding streams primarily directed through three programs: the National Homelessness Initiative, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS), and the Affordable Housing Initiative (AHI).

The components of the National Homelessness Initiative managed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) were the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative, directed toward urban homelessness; Aboriginal Homelessness; and Youth Homelessness. The Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative allocated a maximum amount of money for homelessness projects to each of sixty-one Canadian cities. Funded projects were developed through community consultation and involved partnership with municipal agencies and service providers.

The HPS was designed to build on the programs begun by the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative. Funding is delivered on the premise that housing stability is a precondition for the success of other interventions, such as education and training. The program attempts to employ communities' efforts in solving the unique homelessness needs in their area. Communities are required to obtain funding from other sources than HPS, including private sector partnerships, for projects to be eligible for HPS funding. HPS includes three components: the Homelessness Partnership Initiative, which includes funding for Aboriginal communities; the Homelessness Accountability Network; and the Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative. To address the need for more information about the homeless and the condition of homelessness, HPS funds the Homelessness Individuals and Family Information System Initiative, which provides software to shelter providers to record client information and manage their operations and is currently used in about half of all shelters in Canada.

The AHI is a funding scheme, administered by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and delivered in partnership with the provinces, aimed at increasing affordable housing off-reserve. The program is currently funded until March 2011. The provinces match the funds provided by the federal government through funding from the provinces, municipalities, and the private sector. The scale of funding and the provincial responsibilities are established in bilateral agreements, and each province designs and delivers its own housing program.

The AHI has had two phases, the first of which began in 2001 with $680 million for construction or renovation of rental housing and conversion to social housing. This phase of the program also supports homeownership in rural areas and urban redevelopment areas. The second phase was begun in 2003 and funded capital costs in order to reduce rents to affordable levels. In 2004 and 2005 additional components were introduced to encourage homeownership, improve targeting of programs, provide rent supplements, and develop

cost-sharing agreements. More recent funding streams are also targeting housing for low-income seniors and people with disabilities.

Lessons learned

These federal programs have fallen far short of solving Canada's homelessness crisis. The community planning process of the National Homelessness Initiative/HPS is intended to identify and provide services for underserved populations, but Canada's homelessness crisis is more the result of structural problems than lack of services. These problems are beyond the scope of community planning. They require policy coordination between local organizations and provincial and federal powers, but multiple jurisdictions can lead to conflicting policies and other difficulties that can make it difficult to coordinate policies and funding. These programs are also putting increasing demands on resources that are becoming more and more difficult for communities to afford.

The AHI has been criticized for its insufficient capacity for meeting housing needs and its lack of a coherent goal. For the most part, the result of AHI programs has been provision by the federal government of a lump-sum capital subsidy to existing projects. Few new housing units have been produced, and funding has been insufficient to reduce rents enough to meet the needs of those most at risk of homelessness or to sustain subsidies over the medium to long term.

There is good news, however. The grassroots foundation of these programs allows the development of supportive networks that would not be possible within larger governmental jurisdictions. The community consultation process has produced innovative programs and more effective models for meeting the needs of the homeless. Agencies, advocates, and service providers are learning the importance of working together, and Aboriginal organizations are increasingly being included in the planning process. Two community priorities funded under the HPS specifically target Aboriginal homeless people: providing culturally appropriate transitional services in Surrey for Aboriginal men recovering from long-term addiction, and supporting the operation of a transition house and culturally appropriate emergency services for Aboriginal women and children. In addition, the HPS includes Aboriginal organizations in the implementation of plans to provide additional transitional and supportive housing units for homeless persons with multiple challenges and to support the development and operation of cold and wet weather shelter spaces in Vancouver, the Tri-Cities, and Maple Ridge.

One positive development has been the increasing understanding of the effectiveness of the "housing first" model for addressing homelessness. In the traditional "treatment first" or "continuum of care" model, participants progress along a continuum of housing, from temporary shelter to transitional housing, and to permanent housing when they are determined to be "housing ready." They are required to abstain from drugs and alcohol and participate in mental health treatment if needed. Through the newer "housing first" model, participants are provided with almost immediate access to permanent housing. A money-management program that dedicates a percentage of participants' income to rent and an agreed-upon number of home visits per month by program staff are required, while harm-reduction services such as addiction and mental health counselling are available but voluntary. The housing first model is less expensive than the treatment first model, and participants remain housed longer, spend fewer days in the hospital, and are no more likely

to use drugs or alcohol than participants in treatment first programs.

Another positive result of federal programs directed toward cooperation among jurisdictions is a greater understanding of the benefits of collaborative governance models. Collaborative governance works on both a horizontal level (among agencies at the same level of governance, such as community organizations) and a vertical level (among agencies at different points on the hierarchy of governance, such as local, provincial, and federal). Such a model avoids the problems of badly designed programs cancelling out one another's efforts, fiscal pressures, and program overlap and duplication. Collaborative governance pools resources, cuts costs and wasteful spending, is more likely to lead to fair treatment for citizens, and is a better response to globalization and its attendant drive for harmonization and review of programs across governments.

Need for Aboriginal organizations to serve the Aboriginal homeless

The Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy recognizes the need for more Aboriginal-targeted shelter beds and that funding for programs for homeless Aboriginal Canadians should flow through Aboriginal organizations. The average number of shelter beds per person per night available for Greater Vancouver's entire homeless population is 0.29, but the number of Aboriginal-managed beds per Aboriginal person per night is one-sixth of that, at 0.05. Homeless Aboriginal people feel alienated and disconnected from government programs designed to serve the general population. Aboriginal organizations are more trusted by Aboriginal people and are easier for Aboriginal people to approach. They are are staffed by people who understand, through personal experience, what the Aboriginal homeless are going through.

The historical and ongoing alienation and segregation of Aboriginal people makes the underlying causes of Aboriginal homelessness more ingrained, serious, and complex than the causes underlying homelessness in the general population. Gaps in current programming include a lack of knowledge of the Aboriginal homeless population, the difficulty of coordinating services for a population that tends to be migratory and whose cyclical migratory patterns are not well understood, and the attendant breaks in the continuum of services needed to support the Aboriginal homeless from the streets to secure housing. Most homeless service providers do not have the professional and cultural training needed to respond to the unique characteristics of Aboriginal Canadians. Programs for Aboriginal people that are designed, delivered, and governed by Aboriginal people are more popular and have better outcomes.

Self-determination and self-government goes hand-in-hand with addressing the disproportionate need of Aboriginal people for social welfare goods. Aboriginal organizations are uniquely able to understand the need for a mix of transitional and permanent housing to accommodate the cyclical short-term and long-term needs of migratory urban Aboriginal Canadians. Housing is more than shelter, and as the homeless move from one type of housing to another, other services on which they depend, such as recreation, education, mental and physical health services, and social supports, may not move with them. During transition from one type of housing to another, when people may be most in need of services, services may no longer be available to them. Supportive systems that follow the individual need to be developed to break the cycle of homelessness. Aboriginal organizations are best suited to undertake the holistic approach of incorporating

into housing programs the various services that enable Aboriginal people to sustain an independent lifestyle in urban areas.

A number of case studies demonstrate that Aboriginal housing organizations are able to address Aboriginal homelessness creatively and effectively, despite funding shortages that have made it impossible for Aboriginal housing organizations to fulfill their potential or fully provide for the needs of their communities. Rich Coleman, British Columbia's minister of housing and social development, has acknowledged that the Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA) was largely responsible for British Columbia being the first jurisdiction in Canada to qualify for funding under federal initiatives.

There is a serious risk that non-Aboriginal organizations will end up delivering Aboriginal-specific programs because they have the capacity to "do for" the Aboriginal community. The fear is that these programs will be approached as charities, with need-based participation, rather than being designed to meet Aboriginal requirements and aspirations through processes that respect Aboriginal self-government and self-determination. Funding for Aboriginal homelessness projects has been lost because of delays in Aboriginal groups applying and establishing eligibility for funding. AHMA has a proven track record of working in cooperation with other organizations to develop proposals that meet the requirements for government funding while addressing Aboriginal needs and goals. AHMA is prepared to provide leadership for Aboriginal communities and organizations that need to meet funding requirements and effectively distribute funding to address the needs of the homeless.

Gaps and solutions

Although a great deal has been learned about Aboriginal homelessness, we still have a very incomplete picture of its nature, extent, causes, and demographics. Several issues need further investigation, including a better profile of the homeless population, the nature of the housing market and the extent of discrimination against Aboriginal people in the housing market, and the roles played by abuse and physical and mental health problems. There is also very little research on the cultural appropriateness of existing services. Finally, a shared database on the Aboriginal homeless population needs to be developed by the Aboriginal community. The research process should include gathering information by spending time in communities building relationships and participating in "talking circles."

While much more research is needed on the demographics and needs of homeless Aboriginal people, there are strong indications that supported housing should involve Aboriginal elders in support services and focus on the health of the entire community, not just the individual. Culturally appropriate solutions to Aboriginal homelessness should support the values, beliefs, and traditional practices of Aboriginal people. The development of these programs must continue to include all stakeholders: people living on the streets or dependent on shelters, people at risk of homelessness, First Nations chiefs and councils, elders, municipal councils, service providers, and non-profit organizations. Shelters serving Aboriginal people should be careful not to do things in ways that resemble residential schooling. The "housing first" model, providing permanent housing with support services, would appear to be the most effective for breaking the cycle of Aboriginal homelessness.

Residences for Aboriginal people should be affordable, support Aboriginal ownership and operation, accommodate traditional lifestyles such as the preparation of wild game,

accommodate healing and counselling programs and visits from elders, and accommodate multi-generational households. Long-term funding should be sought, as homelessness is a long-term problem. Special attention needs to be paid to the availability of funding to sustain homelessness programs through the winter months.

Addressing Aboriginal homelessness is a daunting task, but steps can be taken immediately. One of the most important contributions an Aboriginal organization such as AHMA can make is to continue its ongoing research, especially into demographics. This research should lead to and be part of the preparation of a comprehensive policy paper on Aboriginal homelessness, which would incorporate lessons already learned into a proposal for effective intervention into the cycle of Aboriginal homelessness. The ultimate goal of this policy paper would be the development and implementation of an effective national Aboriginal homelessness strategy.

1. Homelessness in Canada

Homelessness in Canada affects between 150,000 and 300,000 people,[2] and current trends are leading toward an unimaginable crisis. In just three years, from, 2002 to 2005, homelessness in the Vancouver area nearly doubled,[3] and it increased by another twenty per cent between 2005 and 2008—while the number of shelter beds remained the same. The 2008 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count found nearly 2,600 homeless, with 1,046 staying at a shelter or other temporary housing and 1,547 living on the streets.[4]

Homelessness is spreading not only geographically but also demographically. In the Vancouver area, the number of homeless seniors nearly tripled between 2002 and 2005, and researchers admit that the numbers are low estimates.[5] Throughout Canada, nearly one in seven people who use emergency shelters are children,[6] and in the 2005 Greater Vancouver Homeless Count, forty homeless families reported having children.[7] The social and school lives of homeless children are disrupted, which makes it strenuous to learn at school. This affects grades and causes literacy problems. Deficits in skills training and education are strongly linked to homelessness, so homeless children are very likely to continue the poverty cycle and end up as homeless adults.[8]

The homelessness crisis exacts a huge financial and moral cost on Canadians. Researchers at Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia and the University of Calgary recently estimated that each homeless person in British Columbia costs federal, provincial, and municipal governments $55,000 per year for expenses such as emergency services, health care, social services, and involvement with the justice system.[9] Homelessness costs British Columbians $644.3 million per year[10] and Canadians between $4.5 billion and $6 billion per year.[11] Recent trends suggest a continual upward rise in the number of homeless, which will cause an upward rise in the costs to Canadians of homelessness.

These numbers illustrate the enormous cost for maintaining the status quo of homelessness. Providing stable, supportive housing is cheaper and more effective than trying to help people who are living in perpetual crisis. It costs only $37,000 per year to connect a B.C. homeless person with housing and appropriate supports, pointing to a possible province-wide savings of $211 million per year from solving the homelessness problem.[12] In Portland, Oregon, researchers found that homeless people who move into permanent supportive housing use between one-third and one-half the emergency services they used when they were homeless.[13]

Causes of homelessness

The massive rise in the number of homeless in Canada can be linked to two structural changes. The first was the decline in the federal and provincial social safety nets, and the second was a change in the global economy. Stephen Gaetz describes how these two systemic factors have impacted different subpopulations, including Aboriginal people, more drastically than others.[14]

Canada began federal housing cuts in the 1980s and stopped developing new social housing units in 1993. Thereafter, the growth in housing need began to outpace the number of social housing units available. Canada also made employment insurance qualifications more restrictive in the 1990s. In British Columbia, the provincial government cut welfare funding

and introduced the six-dollar-an-hour training wage. Combined, these federal and provincial changes have prevented the most vulnerable Canadians from attaining affordable housing.[15]

The second structural change was the combination of the more than doubling of residential real estate prices in metropolitan areas in the past fifteen years[16] and the income stagnation or decline of the past twenty-five years. Higher mortgages without increased income required landlords to charge higher rents. This created a new subgroup in the homeless population—the working homeless. These individuals cannot secure housing because rent consumes a large portion of their incomes. Given that the combination of poverty and the inability to attain affordable housing is the leading cause of homelessness, Canada's diminished social safety nets and huge real estate growth set the stage for the current homelessness crisis.

Canada began to focus on short-term crisis management to manage homelessness, rather than address broad systemic issues. Between 1993 and 2003, funding for affordable housing was spent mainly to sustain existing housing. This strategy has not prevented homelessness from becoming commonplace across Canada.[17]

A good illustration of the effects of the two structural changes discussed above comes from Calgary, which had the fastest-growing homeless population in Canada from 1994 to 2006, when the homeless population grew ten times as fast as the city itself.[18] Alberta cut social housing safety nets in the 1990s while Calgary grew explosively and affordable vacancies shrunk, causing a housing crisis that especially impacted lower-income individuals.[19]

In addition to the systemic factors, certain individual circumstances are linked to homelessness. The B.C. Auditor General cites long-term unemployment, family breakdown (including domestic violence), mental health issues, and substance abuse as personal risk factors for homelessness, in addition to wider factors such as lack of affordable housing (rental and owned), low wages relative to living costs, government decisions to deinstitutionalize the people in mental health facilities, and altered eligibility requirements for income assistance.[20]

Definitions of homelessness

Only about seven per cent of homeless people are permanently or absolutely homeless. Most live in a transition zone, belonging to the working poor and living in itinerant housing, and they have until recently been largely invisible to policy-makers.[21]

Defining homelessness is of particular importance because programs and funding streams are often targeted at particular subgroups. Gaetz asserts that how "we respond to homelessness is largely determined by how we define it."[22] An appropriate definition needs to include more than those living on the streets. Three proposed definitions include a description of a homeless continuum, a cycle of homelessness, and the relative risk categories of losing shelter.[23]

Many researchers agree that a homelessness continuum adequately describes the fluid nature of homelessness. People move repeatedly through stages of securing housing and losing it. This continual flux is well illustrated by movement up and down the continuum of unstable accommodation. Jino Distasio and co-authors[24] describe categories for people who are chronically homeless, those who are temporarily without secure housing, and those who will likely lose their security of tenure. Condon and Newton[25] also describe a homelessness

continuum with three categories. The most extreme is *absolute homelessness*, which describes those without any housing, who may be on the street or in shelter. The second is *hidden homelessness*, which describes those who do not have housing but live with friends or relatives on a temporary basis. The third includes those *at risk of homelessness* due to a combination of high housing costs and low income. Both continuums describe a lack of shelter as the most extreme part of the continuum and place those at risk of becoming homeless at the other end.

The definition based on a cycle of homelessness is similar to the continuum, except that it illustrates homelessness as a continuous cycle that involves many forms of being sheltered and unsheltered over short time frames.[26] This definition is useful because people who are housed may still feel homeless due to their insecure housing. They may rapidly cycle through many accommodations without knowing where they will be next. This definition illustrates two key features of homelessness. The first is that people at imminent risk of losing their shelter are important to incorporate into the definition of homeless. The second is that the state of homelessness is a cycle in which the homeless are trapped.

A third definition of homelessness describes categories of the relative risk of becoming homeless. Income situations, mental health issues, or social or family circumstances may place an individual or family at risk. This definition is inclusive because different demographic groups, such as single-parent families, Aboriginal people, the elderly, and new Canadians have become much more vulnerable to homelessness, though they may still have shelter.

Condon and Newton outline the relative risk categories, as defined by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), that often precede homelessness.[27] Risk categories are an important component of the homelessness definition, because absolute homelessness represents only a small portion of the total homeless population. Many of the homeless are the hidden homeless, who become homeless due to their vulnerability according to the CMHC relative risk categories. *CMHC core housing need* is a category that describes a family or individual who lives in housing that does not meet at least one of the CMHC housing standards of adequacy, suitability, or affordability, or who lacks an income that allows them to rent local market dwellings that do meet these standards. *CMHC severe housing need* (also known by the acronym INALH) describes households that are in need and spending at least half of household income on shelter. According to the 2001 census, this category includes 10.8 per cent of renter households in Canada and 13.3 per cent in British Columbia. *Family homelessness* is the most extreme case and includes those who lack shelter. Single mothers are particularly vulnerable, as they make up 80 per cent of the people in this category in British Columbia. According to Statistics Canada, the percentage of Aboriginal households in core housing need decreased from 1996 to 2006, but the relative proportion is still much higher than that for non-Aboriginal Canadians.

People with severe addictions and/or mental illness (SAMI) compose a substantial percentage of homeless populations. Aboriginal homeless and women have a higher prevalence of SAMI than other subgroups. Patterson and co-authors suggest that people with SAMI require extra support with housing to stay housed and are very likely to become homeless without those additional supports.[28]

Research indicates that the three homeless definitions presented here are useful because they are widely encompassing and include the majority of homeless people. However, since

homelessness is so wide-ranging, counting and accurately describing the homeless population is a formidable task. There are many subcategories: couch surfers, people being released from prisons, battered women and those in transition houses, people being released from hospitals, people in detox centres, people who have no security of tenure but live in inadequate housing, and people who alternate between being sheltered and unsheltered. Recall that those at risk of homelessness also need to be included in any definition of homelessness.[29] The size and diversity of the homeless population make any program design and implementation difficult.

2. Aboriginal Homelessness

Aboriginal people have a unique history, which produced the climate in which the Aboriginal homelessness crisis exists. Aboriginal people have endured segregation at the political, judicial, educational, economic, and physical levels. They have been described as the "colonized, the alienated, the dispossessed, the displaced, the disenfranchised, the oppressed, and the marginalized inhabitants of Canadian society."[30] The Aboriginal homelessness crisis looks different from the mainstream crisis because of this unique history. The crisis is distinctive in three key areas: proportion, the number of hidden homeless, and the young population.

Research correlates Aboriginal history with the Aboriginal homelessness crisis. Michelle Patterson, a research scientist and clinical psychologist working at the Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction at Simon Fraser University, reports that the entire Aboriginal history of colonization, residential schools, wardship in the child welfare system, and marginalization that devastated families and tradition is strongly linked to disproportionate homelessness numbers.[31] No other Canadian group has experienced this legacy, and it is therefore not a surprise that no other Canadian group experiences the same degree of homelessness.

The evidence is undisputed that the proportion of Aboriginal people who are homeless is much higher than that of the rest of the Canadian population across the country. Aboriginal people constitute less than four per cent of the Canadian population but over ten per cent of the national homeless population.[32] Aboriginal homeless are overrepresented in all major cities. In some cities, more than seventy per cent of the homeless are Aboriginal.[33]

In Vancouver, the statistics are quite alarming. In 2005, despite composing two per cent of the total Greater Vancouver population, Aboriginal people composed thirty-four per cent of the street homeless and twenty-three per cent of the sheltered homeless.[34] This indicates that not only is the proportion of Aboriginals among homeless people much higher than their proportion in the general population but also that the Aboriginal homeless are under-using the shelter system. Even more disturbing is that the Greater Vancouver Aboriginal homelessness is worsening. The proportion of the overall homeless population who were Aboriginal increased by two percentage points between 2005 and 2008.

Underlying causes of Aboriginal homelessness

The historical and ongoing alienation and segregation of Aboriginal people makes the underlying causes of Aboriginal homelessness more ingrained, serious, and complex than the causes underlying homelessness in the general population. All measures demonstrate that the economic and social conditions and political influence of Aboriginal people fall well below those of other Canadians. Social, legal, and historical barriers have placed Aboriginal people on the lowest rungs of the Canadian social ladder. The result is that on- and off-reserve, Aboriginal Canadians are disproportionately poor and vulnerable to homelessness. Social programming that does not account for the historical and present-day structural inequalities affecting Aboriginal Canadians will, at best, severely under-solve the problem of homelessness facing this population. Most homeless service providers do not have the professional and cultural training needed to respond to the unique characteristics of Aboriginal Canadians. The most important of these characteristics may be the disruption to

the lives of Aboriginal Canadians caused by residential schools and displacement from their traditional lands.[35]

Residential schools

One of the most influential mechanisms of colonization was residential schooling. As many as five generations of Aboriginal families (over one million children) attended residential schools, and attendees suffered psychological, physical, and sexual abuse in enormous numbers (one hundred per cent by some estimates). Based as it was on the sense of moral and cultural superiority of the colonizers, residential schooling has resulted in resentment and mistrust of non-Aboriginal governments and organizations among Aboriginal people.[36]

Inadequate sanitation, nutritional inadequacies, and the unchecked spread of tuberculosis and other infectious diseases were common in residential schools, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Aboriginal children. Many children reportedly went missing from residential schools, and survivors report children buried in unmarked graves.[37]

Children were not allowed to speak their native languages in residential schools and returned to their families and communities unable to communicate or benefit from the orally transmitted history, values, and beliefs of their people. The removal of Aboriginal children from the care of their families into institutional care resulted in loss of parenting and family management skills. Children were stripped of their individuality and sense of self. Residential schooling has alienated many Aboriginal Canadians from formal education, resulting in a high rate of illiteracy.[38] According to elders in the Sioux Lookout district of Ontario, "An aching desire to numb the pain of past abuses experienced within the residential school system and the social conditions left in its legacy contribute to excessive drinking and substance abuse."[39]

Land displacement

Treaties displaced Aboriginals from their land, moved them to marginal areas, made it impossible for them to sustain the mobility on which their traditional economies depended, and retained lands and resources for government use. These consequences were not the incidental results of the treaties, but objectives clearly written into the documents themselves.[40]

The Indian Act of 1876 gave the government sweeping powers to exercise control over resources on reserve land. Aboriginal people were required to move to reserve settlements, but their use of the land and its resources was severely limited. Resource extraction on and around reserve land put additional pressure on already restricted traditional economic activities such as hunting. Aboriginal people were both deprived of their traditional means of livelihood and denied the opportunities for capital accumulation necessary to develop new enterprise.[41]

Research indicates that displacement, like residential schooling, has contributed to diminished health, employment, and economic opportunity as well as increased addiction and cultural disintegration. Like the disruption caused by residential schooling, the disruption caused by displacement is central to the socioeconomic deprivation that has led to drastically disproportionate rates of Aboriginal homelessness, and cannot be ignored if effective assistance is to be provided to homeless Aboriginal Canadians.[42]

Risk factors in Aboriginal homelessness

> *"Many Aboriginal people come to Prince Rupert from the surrounding reserves for education or in search of work. Instead, the major source of income for this group is now income assistance, with 83% of the sample group earning less than $10,000. The group is at high risk for homelessness since a majority pay 50% or more of monthly income for rent."*[43]

The United Native Nations describes three factors contributing to Aboriginal homelessness. Historical factors include the aforementioned history of oppression, alienation and marginalization. This history includes the loss of tradition and the placement of Aboriginal children in residential schools. A second factor is the existing social structure, which includes unemployment, discrimination, patriarchy, displacement, and the reserve system. The third category contains the personal reasons for becoming homeless. These are family-related matters, addictions, fetal alcohol syndrome, poor health, and the lure of adventure. It is important to note that the three factors are not mutually exclusive, as history influences structure, which in turn influences Aboriginal people at an individual level.[44]

Distasio and co-authors have found that there is a significant shortage of affordable accommodation for the urban Aboriginal population, both for short- and long-term needs, and that there is no typical demographic among the Aboriginal homeless. Rather, Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness are a diverse group, represented by men and women, youth and elders, single-parent families and, increasingly, other families. The reasons for housing distress among this group are equally wide-ranging. However, all are united in their overwhelming poverty and lack of adequate shelter.[45] Urban Aboriginals at risk of becoming absolutely homeless also face systemic barriers such as poverty, low education, and family crises that may prevent them from finding appropriate accommodation.[46]

Socioeconomic factors

Aboriginal homeless are more likely to remain homeless. A report for the Wellesley Institute found that social disconnection may predict the homelessness cycle and, therefore, a person's inability to acquire and maintain housing.[47] Aboriginal people, with their history of segregation and alienation, are particularly vulnerable to feeling socially disconnected.

Deb Sider has presented a case study of the Sioux Lookout homelessness problem.[48] She found that because children in Sioux Lookout who attended residential schools were unable to learn their culture but also felt alienated from the mainstream Canadian education system, they feel lost between two worlds. This has led to feelings of hopelessness and lack of power, which some attempt to lesson by abusing alcohol or other substances. Substance abuse strengthens the poverty cycle and makes people from such families more likely to become homeless in the future. The Sioux Lookout study outlines alienation throughout history as having a twofold affect. First, it is a force that keeps people in the homelessness cycle. Second, attempts to deal with feelings of hopelessness through substance abuse create unstable personal circumstances, which may also lead to homelessness.

Conditions that alienate Aboriginal people are particularly damaging for the most vulnerable homeless individuals. Jacque Tremblay argues that there is a strong need for programming and administration that can understand and manage social disconnection.[49] There is no better group to manage social disconnection than Aboriginal people, who understand the structural circumstances that generate obstacles at the individual level. Aboriginal people must provide the main leadership to address the Aboriginal homelessness crisis.

A study by Lu'ma Native Housing and the consulting firm dbappleton found that the Aboriginal homeless may experience discrimination when trying to secure accommodation, which results in inability to attain security of tenure.[50]

Migration

The movement of Aboriginal people between reserves and cities and within urban areas is another unique feature of Aboriginal homelessness. The 2005 study by Distasio and co-authors confirmed that, for many Aboriginal people, migration from rural communities to urban areas creates a complex dynamic between their inability to find appropriate accommodation in the city and their connection to home. New arrivals to a city will often live with friends or family under crowded conditions. Low incomes and discrimination by landlords cause the search for housing to become a chronic, daily struggle for Aboriginal people who move to cities, who often live each day not knowing where they will spend the night. Although they may have been attracted to the city because of perceived housing availability, once there, Aboriginal people often find that racism, unaffordable housing, and social conditions push them back to reserves or rural areas.[51]

Distasio and co-authors explain that hidden Aboriginal homelessness in rural areas contributes to urban Aboriginal homelessness as movement between reserves and rural areas becomes a circular pattern.[52] They state, "The effects of chronic housing distress contribute to hyper-mobility and the insurmountable obstacles experienced by Aboriginal individuals when attempting to establish residency in urban areas of Canada."[53]

Faces of Aboriginal homelessness

The City of Calgary surveyed homeless Aboriginal people in 2002 to get a demographic profile of the population. The study found that Aboriginal homeless people tend to have unique backgrounds and need extra support and services to break out of the homelessness cycle. A significant number had attended residential school, had parents who had attended residential school or had been in jail, or had had harmful experiences with child welfare authorities. Nearly a third had been institutionalized.[54]

Hidden homelessness

Research indicates that hidden homelessness is more severe within Aboriginal populations when compared with the overall homeless population. Distasio and co-authors[55] and Helin[56] link this to housing distress related to poverty and a lack of shelter opportunity, in addition to higher mobility rates.

Distasio and co-authors' research on hidden homelessness among Aboriginal people in prairie cities found that social supports "hid" the Aboriginal homeless population from the absolutely homeless by providing a physical shelter. The authors found that the hypermobility of Aboriginal people contributed to high rates of hidden homelessness.[57]

Homeless youth

Homelessness among Aboriginal youth is on the rise.[58] Canada's Aboriginal population is younger, overall, than the general population, and Aboriginal youth are the fastest-growing segment of the Canadian population. A third of Canada's Aboriginal population is under the age of fourteen, and half are under the age of twenty-five.[59] This comparatively younger

population is correlated with higher unemployment and lower educational levels among Aboriginal people.[60]

The CMHC defines homeless youth as youth with no permanent address, while other researchers define the group as including those who do not live with a family in a home and are not under government care and those who live in "an unsafe or temporary living environment."[61] Homeless youth have had to leave home at an early age, and have often come from state care such as foster or group homes. They often fall through the gaps in the child protective system, being too old to be well-served by children's services but not yet eligible for adult services.[62] Aboriginal children are over-represented in the child protective system, which is a historical tool of colonization.[63] Establishing Aboriginal control over Aboriginal child welfare will be an important step in addressing homelessness among Aboriginal youth.

Low education levels are strongly correlated with poverty and unemployment. However, the education system alienates many Aboriginal youth, thereby indirectly contributing to the homelessness cycle by placing Aboriginal youth at risk for poverty and unemployment, and therefore of homelessness. The effects of the education system illustrate how mainstream programs may not be suitable for, and may further alienate, vulnerable Aboriginal populations. This theme frequently surfaces in homelessness literature.[64]

Cyndy Baskin of the School of Social Work at Ryerson University conducted a study involving twenty-four Aboriginal homeless youth in Toronto.[65] Most of the participants had grown up in the care of the Children's Aid Society, and over half had had to move more than once, in many cases around the country. Many had experienced various forms of abuse in these homes. Only one had lived with both biological parents for any length of time.[66] Although the youth in the study all had different reasons for leaving home, all said that street life was better than the lives they had left behind.[67]

Once on the street, most of the youth turned for help from other people or agencies from the Aboriginal community. Although most felt most comfortable receiving help from an Aboriginal agency, they sought help from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations. Many of the youth felt that the most important systemic improvement to help Aboriginal youth was the formation of an Aboriginal child and family services agency with authority over child welfare, although many of the youth who were parents felt that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal child welfare agencies were equally discriminatory toward young parents.[68] All the youth agreed, however, that the child welfare system and the legislation that enabled it needed to be more inclusive of Aboriginal needs and values.[69]

3. Homelessness programs in Canada

Various homelessness programs are available for Aboriginal clients across Canada. Federal programs provide funding streams for provincial and local programs. Some programs are specifically aimed at the Aboriginal population, while most are for all homeless people, including Aboriginal people.

Federal programs

Stephen Gaetz[70] traces the need for homelessness funding streams in the 1990s to federal housing cuts in the 1980s. The new funding streams produced three programs: the National Homelessness Initiative, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, and the Affordable Housing Initiative. The last is a federal program, overseen by the CMHC, to increase the supply of off-reserve affordable housing in Canada.

National Homelessness Initiative

The six components of the National Homelessness Initiative were managed by three different departments: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), Public Works and Government Services Canada, and the CMHC.

The Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative, Aboriginal Homelessness, and Youth Homelessness are the components of the National Homelessness Initiative managed by HRSDC. The Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative was the main National Homelessness Initiative component, and the funding stream was directed toward homelessness in Canadian cities. Each of the sixty-one cities identified under the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative was allocated a maximum amount of money to use for homelessness projects. Projects that received funding through the initiative were developed through community consultation and were encouraged to establish partnerships with municipal agencies and service providers.[71]

Within the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative, communities could deliver homelessness programming using two models, the community entity model and the shared delivery model. In the first model, an organization developed and implemented a community plan and chose which projects received initiative funding. In the shared delivery model, HRSDC helped develop and implement a community plan with community groups. HRSDC had the final say in accepting projects for funding. Federal funding for that initiative ended in 2006.[72]

The HRSDC's two other components, Aboriginal Homelessness and Youth Homelessness, were intended to address the large homelessness problems within specific populations. Funding for the Aboriginal Homelessness component was administered through Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agreements (AHRDAs), and funds were given to local HRSDC offices that managed the AHRDAs. Aboriginal Homelessness projects were meant to be a part of the wider community plan but had separate funding streams. The Youth Homelessness component was delivered by the Youth Employment Strategy under HRDC.[73]

The remaining National Homelessness Initiative components were the Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative (with Public Works and Government Services Canada),

the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (with the CMHC) and the Shelter Enhancement Program (also with the CMHC).[74]

Homelessness Partnering Strategy

The Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) is built on what the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative tried to accomplish and is delivered on the premise that housing stability is a precondition to enhancing the success of other interventions, such as education and training. The program attempts to employ communities' efforts in solving the unique homelessness needs in their area. For the community planning process, the HPS specifically asks who else, other than the HPS program, will help fund a priority area, and it therefore forces communities to obtain a variety of funding sources for their strategies. The HPS includes three components: the Homelessness Partnership Initiative, the Homelessness Accountability Network, and the Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative.[75]

The Homelessness Partnership Initiative includes funding for Aboriginal communities. Funding may include support for the community planning processes required before calls for proposals go out, which includes research into community needs. Project selection is usually completed by a community agency or the HRSDC, and selected projects fit into community plan priorities and targets. The HPS has helped create private sector partnerships through funding restrictions that ensure only a portion of the money for projects comes from the HPS.[76]

To get a better snapshot of the homeless population, the HPS funds the Homelessness Individuals and Family Information System Initiative. This program provides software to shelter providers to record client information and manage their operations. It is currently used in about half of all shelters in Canada.[77] The HPS also works with provinces and territories to develop partnerships with the federal government and communities.[78]

Affordable Housing Initiative

The Affordable Housing Initiative (AHI) is a funding scheme, administered by the CMHC and delivered in partnership with the provinces, aimed at increasing affordable housing off-reserve. The program is currently funded until March 2011. The provinces match the funds provided by the federal government, though the funding may come directly from the province, or from municipalities or the private sector. The scale of funding and the provincial responsibilities are established in bilateral agreements, and each province designs and delivers its own housing program.[79]

The AHI has had two phases, the first of which began in 2001 with $680 million of construction or renovation of rental housing and conversion to social housing. This phase of the program also supports homeownership in rural areas and urban redevelopment areas. The second phase was begun in 2003 and funded capital costs needed to reduce rents to affordable levels. In 2004 and 2005, additional components were introduced to encourage homeownership, improve targeting of programs, provide rent supplements, and develop cost-sharing agreements. Recent funding streams are also targeting housing for low-income seniors and people with disabilities.[80]

Homelessness service models

Nick Falvo describes two models of providing housing to homeless persons. Through the traditional "treatment first" or "continuum of care" model, participants progress along a continuum of housing, from temporary shelter to transitional housing, to permanent housing when they are determined to be "housing ready." They are required to abstain from drugs and alcohol and participate in mental health therapy, including drug therapy, if needed. Through the newer "housing first" model, participants are provided with almost immediate access to permanent housing. A money-management program that dedicates a percentage of their income for rent is required, along with an agreed-upon number of home visits per month by program staff, while harm-reduction services such as addiction and mental health counselling are available but voluntary. The housing first model is less expensive than the treatment first model, and participants remain housed longer, spend fewer days in the hospital, and are no more likely to use drugs or alcohol than participants in treatment first programs.[81] Provincial and municipal programs generally follow one of these two models.

Provincial programs in western Canada

When the federal government formed the AHI in 2001, it was intended that the provincial governments would at least match the federal funding commitment. A number of provincial programs have been developed in British Columbia and Alberta in partnership with the federal government as well as municipalities and local communities.

British Columbia

The first five-year agreement with British Columbia committed $177 million in federal and provincial contributions. The services for the program were delivered through Independent Living BC, a housing health program for people with disabilities and seniors, and Homes BC.[82] The second phase of funding, which dedicated $84 million ($42 million each from the federal and provincial governments) beginning in 2004, was directed toward the Provincial Homelessness Initiative, a scheme intended to provide a continuum of housing and support services to help people break the cycle of homelessness.[83] In practice, this means emergency and transitional housing.

In 2005 the federal government passed Bill C-481, providing $1.4 billion for affordable housing nationwide. With the announcement of a massive surplus in 2006, the government committed another $157 million for affordable housing in British Columbia, of which $51 million went into the Off-Reserve Aboriginal Housing Trust. That same year, the Province of British Columbia announced the new Housing Matters BC strategy, which would provide supportive housing to vulnerable populations through Independent Living BC and the Provincial Homelessness Initiative, as well as rental assistance. Finally, in 2007 the province dedicated $2 billion over four years to address housing challenges, with $1.5 billion going toward income tax cuts and the rest for housing and support services. The initiative increased the shelter rate for those on income assistance by $50 a month and added $250 million to the housing endowment fund, which provides funds for new housing initiatives that include supportive units and off-reserve Aboriginal housing.[84]

The Homes BC program was started in 1994 to provide housing for families and individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming so. The government targets the hard to house through the homeless/at-risk component of the program. The program includes a

transitional component for moving people from emergency to permanent housing. One hundred eighty units of second-stage housing are provided for people at risk of becoming homeless. One hundred seventy units of second-stage housing, combined with emergency shelter beds, are available for people who are homeless. Seven hundred units are dedicated to low-income single people, and two hundred supportive housing units are provided for seniors who require some assistance to continue living independently.[85]

Alberta

Phase I of the Canada-Alberta Affordable Housing Program Agreement was initiated in 2002, and Phase II in 2005. Phase I directed $109 million to building new and renovating existing rental housing that was affordable to low- to moderate-income households. Phase II committed $63 million more for affordable and supportive housing initiatives targeted to people waiting for social housing in high-need communities. Services are provided through Alberta Seniors and Community Supports.[86] In 2009 Canada and Alberta signed an amendment to the agreement that adds $386 million over the next two years to provide new and upgraded social housing for seniors, people with disabilities, and families in need.[87]

Alberta Housing and Urban Affairs has developed the Plan for Alberta—Ending Homelessness in Alberta. Recognizing that emergency shelters are not a long-term housing option, the plan addresses homelessness through the "housing first" model. Housing and Urban Affairs has committed $100 million in 2009–2010 to develop permanent housing for the homeless. An additional $32 million in funding is being provided to deliver services through local, community-based organizations to help people maintain their housing over the long term. Funding is allocated to communities based on population and use of shelter space.[88] Over the ten-year life of the program, Alberta expects the total capital investment to be $1.28 billion, including $500 million for 2,500 units to house 3,000 chronic homeless, $528 million for 4,400 units to house 5,500 transient homeless, $30 million for 300 units to house 1,500 employable homeless, and $200 million for 800 units to house 1,000 homeless families.[89]

Several service models are currently being piloted by Alberta communities. Pathways to Housing is a low-barrier program targeting chronically homeless persons and homeless persons facing multiple barriers to housing. Pathways provides permanent housing with 24/7 wrap-around support services provided by an "assertive community treatment" team of professionals. Rapid Exit re-houses single people and families in rental housing and provides ongoing support, including landlord recruitment. Streets to Homes locates permanent housing for homeless people and provides intensive case-management services, accessing a network of partner agencies. Over the ten-year life of the program, Alberta expects to spend $2.058 billion on support services, including $1.02 billion for chronically homeless people through Pathways to Housing, $770 million for transiently homeless people through Rapid Exit (singles) and Streets to Homes, $90 million for employable homeless people through employment readiness and affordable rental programs, and $178 million for homeless families through Rapid Exit (families).[90]

Municipal programs

Major cities throughout Canada are tackling homelessness through various programs that follow both treatment first and housing first models. Although these programs often

consider the needs of Aboriginal homeless people or include Aboriginal groups in decision-making, none is Aboriginally managed, and none has a specific Aboriginal focus.

Vancouver

Background research by Metro Vancouver indicates that Aboriginal people are over-represented in both homeless subpopulations described—street/service homeless and sheltered homeless.[91] A regional steering committee on homelessness was formed in the Greater Vancouver Regional District in 2000. As the community partner of the HPS in Greater Vancouver, the steering committee is responsible for recommending projects for funding. Aboriginal groups were included in the community consultations held in spring 2007 to identify priority funding areas.

Two community priorities funded under the HPS and approved by the steering committee specifically target Aboriginal homeless people: providing culturally appropriate transitional services in Surrey for Aboriginal men recovering from long-term addiction, and supporting the operation of a transition house and culturally appropriate emergency services for Aboriginal women and children. In addition, the HPS includes Aboriginal organizations in the implementation of plans to provide additional transitional and supportive housing units for homeless people with multiple challenges and to support the development and operation of cold and wet weather shelter spaces in Vancouver, the Tri-Cities, and Maple Ridge.[92]

The Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy recognizes the need for more Aboriginal-targeted shelter beds. The report indicates that the average number of shelter beds per person per night available for Greater Vancouver's entire homeless population is 0.29, but the number of Aboriginal-managed beds per Aboriginal person per night is roughly one-sixth that number at 0.05. Thus the Aboriginal homeless population is not only disproportionately represented in the homelessness statistics but also severely underserved. Given that the Aboriginal homeless are more likely to access Aboriginal services and that they under-use the mainstream shelter system, there is a huge need for more shelter beds for the Aboriginal homeless managed by Aboriginal organizations.[93]

Victoria

The Victoria Cool Aid Society began over forty years ago as a hostel providing short-term, emergency shelter to transient youth. Today, Cool Aid is best known for providing housing services, although Cool Aid also provides health and dental care, a casual labour pool, and a downtown community centre. While Cool Aid operates emergency and transitional shelters, Cool Aid's housing focus is on "housing first," providing permanent housing and building working relationships and trust with tenants. When tenants are ready, they are supported to take initiative in dealing with issues in their lives that place them at risk for future homelessness, such as addiction and mental health.[94]

Toronto

Research indicates that homelessness has grown six times faster than Toronto's overall population since 1960 and that because the number of available rental units is not keeping up with demand, twenty-five per cent of households in Toronto cannot afford the average market rent.[95]

Toronto's Eva's Initiatives works with homeless and at-risk youth aged 16 to 24 to get them

off the streets permanently. Eva's Initiatives operate three shelters in the Greater Toronto Area that house 122 youth each night, but the program not only provides shelter but also helps youth aged improve their entire lives. Services include emergency and transitional housing, harm-reduction services to address drug and alcohol use, counselling, employment and training programs, housing support, and services to reconnect youth with their families.[96]

Toronto's Streets to Homes program is a "housing first" program that helps homeless people move quickly and directly from the street into permanent housing. People with addictions are not obligated to abstain from alcohol or drugs, nor are people with mental health issues required to maintain their medication schedules. Participants are assisted with health care, ID replacements, and social supports once they are in housing.[97]

The program has permanently housed six hundred people per year since the program was started in 2005, and eighty-seven per cent of tenants remain housed. Most participants reported improvements in health, nutrition, stress levels, sleep, personal safety, and mental health. Seventeen per cent stopped drinking, and a third reported that they were no longer on drugs. Participants had fewer emergency room visits, spent less time in jail, and were arrested less frequently than before they started the program. Aboriginal people account for twenty-six per cent of participants, and while significantly fewer Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal participants reported improvements in areas of their lives other than housing, improvements for Aboriginal participants were still substantial.[98]

Calgary

The Calgary Homeless Foundation was founded in 1998 by a local philanthropist. In 2008 it was selected to implement the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness created by the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, a community-based, multistakeholder leadership group. The foundation is working with government agencies, the private sector, the faith community, other foundations, and individual Calgarians to end homelessness in Calgary.[99] In the short term, the plan is designed to create "rapid, visible, and meaningful change by focusing attention on chronic homelessness and prevention." In the long term, the creation of 11,250 housing units and major systemic changes to eliminate barriers to permanent housing are planned. Like Victoria's Cool Aid and Toronto's Eva's Initiatives and Streets to Homes, Calgary's 10 Year Plan is a "housing first" program that focuses on self-sufficiency and independence.[100]

4. Unmet needs for addressing Aboriginal homelessness

A useful body of literature already outlines the limitations of recent federal, provincial, and local homelessness programs with regard to the unique circumstances faced by homeless Aboriginal Canadians. In addition to the immediate lack of shelter, Aboriginal homelessness is impacted by structural problems that have historically been especially resistant to solution for Aboriginal people, including the lack of social safety nets, poverty, and the lack of affordable housing.

The United Native Nations has identified twenty gaps in services to Aboriginal homeless Canadians:

- Lack of culturally relevant emergency shelters;
- Lack of supported and transitional housing for Aboriginal males;
- Lack of access to services for rural and isolated people;
- Insufficient transitional and second-stage housing;
- Lack of availability of rent supplements for Aboriginal women and children;
- Insufficient residential treatment for alcohol and drug addiction;
- Lack of availability of low-income rental housing;
- Lack of measures to address overcrowding;
- Insufficient housing units for the elderly;
- Lack of long-term housing for people with HIV/AIDS;
- Insufficient shelter capacity;
- Insufficient shelters for Aboriginal youth;
- Lack of support for Aboriginal homeless with mental health concerns;
- Lack of data on the demographics of the Aboriginal homeless;
- Lack of employment opportunities;
- Lack of outreach services;
- Lack of coordination among Aboriginal service providers;
- Lack of drop-in centres;
- Lack of accessible health and dental services directed toward Aboriginal needs; and
- Lack of family supports.[101]

Of these, perhaps the most important needs are lack of coordination among Aboriginal service providers and lack of necessary family supports as part of a continuum of housing and support services.

Addressing structural problems

Programming can only manage service-delivery problems. There need to be strategies that deal with the structural problems underlying homelessness in general and Aboriginal homelessness in particular. The community planning process of the National Homelessness Initiative/HPS is intended to identify and provide services for underserved populations, but the problem isn't solely lack of services—structural problems play a large part. These problems are beyond the scope of community planning. They require policy coordination between local organizations and provincial and federal powers. However, multiple

jurisdictions can lead to conflicting policies and other difficulties that can make it difficult to coordinate policies and funding.[102]

In order to eliminate homelessness, especially hidden homelessness, programs must establish long-term goals that will lead to permanent housing. Unfortunately, most program responses are reactive rather than proactive. Supportive networks for the hidden homeless do exist, however. Distasio and co-authors document these networks in prairie cities and report that they are located along a continuum from formal to informal. The relationship between the hidden Aboriginal homeless and housed Aboriginal people is often symbiotic, with the housed providing shelter and "couch surfers" assisting with rent or providing in-kind support, such as childcare services. Programming is shifting from the federal and provincial to the community level. The good news is that the grassroots foundation of these programs allows the development of supportive networks that would not be possible within larger governmental jurisdictions. The bad news is that the increasing demand on community agencies is straining their resources.[103]

Research into Aboriginal homelessness

Very little research follows the homeless through the entire cycle of homelessness. Failure to examine what happens to the chronically homeless during periods of time when they may be housed seriously distorts our understanding of what "homelessness" really looks like.[104]

The Office of the B.C. Auditor General notes that government does not have "an understanding of the causes and patterns of homelessness" and is not "aware of where key gaps in programs and services exist." Consequently, government does not have "a clear profile of the homeless population." Municipalities conducting homeless surveys do not always use the same methodology, which makes it difficult to compare their findings. In addition, the government has not aggregated the information it has about services available to the homeless, which makes gaps in services difficult to identify. The Auditor General hopes that the province's development of a homeless management information system will lead to a better understanding of how the homeless are using programs and services and help identify ongoing needs.[105]

One part of the picture of Aboriginal homelessness that is missing is information about short-term, cyclical migration of Aboriginal people. Census-based data compares an individual's place of residence at two points. If the person's residence is different at the second point than the first, the assumption is made that the person has permanently relocated. Aboriginal people often circulate through a network of places. Multiple moves and moves away from and back to a place are not captured by this data collection system. Not only does it not effectively capture Aboriginal movement, it overlooks the fact that the homeless do not have a single, fixed place of residence. Residential space for Aboriginal people may be more correctly described regionally, rather than in a fixed locale. A new understanding of place and geographic movement are necessary to understand the mobility and housing issues of Aboriginal people.[106]

Although Distasio and co-authors reveal some of the complicated dynamics of hidden Aboriginal homelessness, more extensive research into the issue is needed. The authors say that "although there has been long-term interest in the mobility behaviour of Indigenous populations, knowledge of this issue is fragmented due to the limitations of existing data sources." Low participation in the official reports, such as the census, leads to

underestimations of Aboriginal populations. Likewise, the census does not capture transient individuals or new arrivals to a location. As the homeless population tends to be by definition transient, there is no good measurement of homeless Aboriginal Canadians.[107]

According to Sharon Helin, the next steps for research on Aboriginal homelessness should look at several issues. The first is developing a better profile of the homeless population. Noting that attempting to count and categorize homeless Aboriginal Canadians is unrealistic, working with agencies that provide services to the homeless and at-risk populations to develop a more complete profile would be a better strategy. Second, determining the extent of discrimination against Aboriginal people in the housing market through fair housing audits, looking at the roles played by abuse and physical and mental health problems, and examining the housing market would yield data that would help better understand Aboriginal homelessness. Finally, Helin notes there is very little research on the cultural appropriateness of existing services.[108]

Laird notes that Canada lags behind other developed countries when it comes to having usable data with which to combat homelessness. For example, Americans now have a national estimate, not only of the total number of homeless people, but also of whether or not they were dependent on shelters or chronically homeless and what percentage were single adults versus families. "Having this data brings all of us another step closer to understanding the scope and nature of homelessness in America," said Alphonso Jackson of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "Understanding homelessness is a necessary step to addressing it successfully."[109]

Improving coordination

Writing for Canadian Policy Research Networks Inc. and Social Housing Services Corporation, Michel Molgat Sereacki idealizes "a truly inclusive and collaborative governmental model" as one that works on both a horizontal level (among agencies at the same level of governance, such as community organizations) and a vertical level (among agencies at different points on the hierarchy of governance, such as local, provincial, and federal). Sereacki calls this "collaborative governance" and views such governance as a model for better using resources to address needs.[110]

Collaborative governance avoids the problems of badly designed programs cancelling out one another's effects, fiscal pressures, and program overlap and duplication. Collaborative government pools resources, cuts costs and wasteful spending, is more likely to lead to fair treatment for citizens, and is a better response to globalization and its attendant drive for harmonization and review of programs across governments.[111]

During times of rapid change and heavy program loads, policy coordination is more difficult. During these times, central agencies can be used to facilitate and manage interdepartmental policy development by clarifying relationships, establishing priorities, and managing policy loads. Strategies for achieving this coordination include realistic timelines and early direction on implementation funding.[112]

The Community Initiatives Program, a component of Manitoba's Neighbourhoods Alive! strategy and Newfoundland and Labrador's Strategic Social Plan are examples of attempts at collaborative government. The Community Initiatives Program directs funding to a variety of activities affecting structural issues, such as economic development, safety and crime

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prevention, reduction of high-risk behaviour, better health practices, and stronger landlord-tenant relations, through both horizontal and vertical coordination and cooperation.[113]

The Strategic Social Plan Office (SSPO) managed Newfoundland and Labrador's Strategic Social Plan, described as "the most ambitious horizontal policy-making process" and "unlike any social plan ever seen." The SSPO had the mandate to provide "overall direction and support for the implementation of the Strategic Social Plan, including internal and external communications, budget preparation and monitoring, general administration and operations support, departmental liaison, liaison with support for the Regional Steering Committees, research coordination, coordination of activities related to the social audit, and support work for the Premier's Council." This may have been an overwhelming agenda for the SSPO, which consisted of only eight people, had a stagnant budget, and was operating in uncharted territory. This lack of planning resulted in a tendency by the SSPO to invent itself along the way, which some policy researchers saw as a cause for concern. The goals of the Strategic Social Plan program itself were clearly stated, as were the roles of the implementing entities, but the lack of a well-developed partnership strategy left gaps in implementation, such as in reporting and evaluation.[114]

In the United States, Oregon's Ending Homelessness Advisory Council states that the discontinuity or lack of services is a root cause of homelessness in Oregon. Federal, state, and local programs each have their own objectives and client base, and they lack connections to other programs serving similar populations. Barriers to accessing services include the very condition of homelessness. Individuals may not have the appropriate documentation and therefore may be unable to prove their eligibility for services. Also the lack of stable housing, food, and transportation hinders accessibility. Lack of homelessness prevention is also a root cause. Programs need to focus on helping individuals transition out of their services, not just meeting needs while people are in their service. In order to do this, the action plan recommends implementation of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's "continuum of care" strategy, which relies on a local or regional body that coordinates services and funding for homeless people and families, with a focus on permanent housing.[115]

Ryan Walker criticizes the AHI for its "much reduced capacity for meeting housing needs and for its lack of a coherent goal."[116] The result was provision by the federal government of a lump-sum capital subsidy to existing projects. Few new housing units were produced, and funding was insufficient to reduce rents enough to meet the needs of those most at risk of homelessness or to sustain subsidies over the medium to long term. Walker produces several case studies to demonstrate that Aboriginal housing organizations have shown that they are able to address Aboriginal homelessness "innovatively and reliably."[117] Inadequate government financial allocations, however, have made it impossible for Aboriginal housing organizations to fulfill their potential or fully provide for the needs of their communities.[118]

Laird points out that in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, government is spending $51 million a year to maintain people on the street. Meeting the needs of the homeless is impeded by differing opinions about what should or shouldn't be done. For instance, former city councillor Tim Lewis is cautious about building new social housing, favouring increased rent subsidies, while others claim rent subsidies aggravate the homelessness problem by inflating local rents. Linda Mix, a community legal worker at the Tenants Rights Action Coalition, agrees that social housing will not solve the problem in and of itself, but believes a

combination of social housing and realistic rent subsidies is needed. Not-in-my-backyard attitudes impede the development of affordable housing and increase its cost.[119]

As politicians, service providers, and neighbourhood associations reason together, few consult the homeless themselves about what would help. "I've lived in the Downtown Eastside for thirty-three years," says Jim Green. "And everyone is the world's expert on how to fix the poor. But the poor's knowledge is often discounted. That's why we have hundreds of thousands of dollars wasted on the downtown to test theories."[120] Laird believes "British Columbia could benefit from a broad range of alternatives, including market incentives for developers to incorporate low-income housing into new developments; increasing welfare shelter allowances; and reforms to the Residential Tenancy Act."[121]

Breaks in the continuum of services

Wabano Centre's homelessness program concluded that the lack of a continuum of Aboriginal-specific services from the street to long-term housing contributes to the large numbers of Aboriginal people on the streets or at risk. As health issues are often implicated in Aboriginal homelessness, an effective continuum of services would include individual wellness plans through identification of health issues and early prevention.

Programs for the homeless must not only provide for those already in crisis but also must provide for intervention and prevention. Existing services do not provide the continuum of services necessary to meet the needs of homeless Aboriginal Canadians or those at risk of homelessness.[122]

Tremblay sees Toronto's current homelessness programs as fragmented and confusing. The resources devoted to solving the homelessness problem are considerable, but the system is not integrated, focusing most of its resources on crisis management and warehousing. Inter-agency cooperation and integration and integration within systems are absent, and their absence raises barriers that frustrate the efforts of both the homeless and the service providers who serve them. A good example of this frustration is Toronto's reliance on shared housing. While shared housing appears to be cost effective, it may actually be perpetuating homelessness by worsening identification with the homeless role and failing to provide people with sustainable support as they proceed along the path from living on the streets to long-term, stable housing. Government housing policy must incorporate health policy. The lack of harm-reduction services means homeless people transitioning to stable housing are unsafe. The reliance on shared housing exacerbates these safety issues. Safe, sheltered environments are essential to breaking the cycle of homelessness.[123]

Homelessness is cyclical, not linear, and government-funded housing and support systems need to be sensitive to the fact that as the homeless move from one type of housing to another, other services on which they depend may not move with them. These services include recreation, education, mental and physical health services, and social supports. Currently, these services are all too often linked to the type of housing, rather than to the individual progressing along the continuum to stable housing. During transition from one type of housing to another, when people may most be in need of services, services may no longer be available to them. Supportive systems that follow the individual need to be developed to break the cycle of homelessness.[124]

The homeless need not only to be housed but also to be integrated into their communities. The homeless are disconnected from family, friends, and social networks for a wide variety

of complex and interconnected reasons. The homeless often need help redeveloping formal and informal social support networks. Services such as recreation, mental and physical health services, skills development, social enterprise training, and community-building programs are needed to help people transition from homelessness to safety. These services need to be individualized, as all homeless people are not the same. Multiple factors interacting in complex systems result in individuals becoming homeless. Service providers need assistance in recognizing the complexity of homelessness as the homeless experience it.[125]

Gaetz points out that continuity of services is sensitive to the length of funding for projects. Longer-term funding is required if the cycle of homelessness is to be broken.[126]

5. Proposed solutions

Culturally appropriate solutions to Aboriginal homelessness should support the values, beliefs, and traditional practices of Aboriginal people. The development of these programs must continue to include all stakeholders: people living on the streets, chiefs and councils, elders, municipal councils, service providers, and non-profit organizations.[127] Shelters serving Aboriginal people should be careful not to do things in ways that resemble residential schooling.[128] The "housing first" model, providing permanent housing with support services, would appear to be the most effective for breaking the cycle of Aboriginal homelessness.[129] A continuum of strategies and services would include:

- Emergency services;
- Structured intake;
- Client participation in service delivery;
- Establishment of an accurate database identifying numbers and gaps in services;
- Safety measures;
- In-house workshops for independence;
- A tracking system;
- A land-based healing system;
- Detox and treatment services close where people need them;
- Community cooperation and cooperation among First Nations groups in different regions;
- Innovative development of affordable and transitional housing;
- Discharge planning at correctional institutions; and
- Education, at least through the high school level, and skills development and training.[130]

Serious problems such as Aboriginal homelessness require ambitious solutions, but we can begin with the following:

- Make prevention and transition from homelessness central to our strategy while maintaining emergency support.
- Strengthen and expand our national strategy, recognizing that it is cheaper to house people than to provide services for those on the streets.
- Involve all levels of government.
- Support innovation.
- Encourage evidence-based solutions, which will require research.
- Stop criminalizing homelessness and the survival strategies of the homeless, such as panhandling.
- Invest in affordable housing.[131]

Homeless Aboriginal Canadians with SAMI require special strategies, including the following:

- Development of a specific strategy to address the disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal people who both have SAMI and are inadequately housed;

- Development of a co-delivery or partnership model with AHMA, Aboriginal Health, Aboriginal housing service providers, and the CMHC for the construction of housing, possibly using funding from cost-sharing agreements between the provinces and the federal government;
- Combining trades training for Aboriginal people with subsidized housing construction; and
- Using a "housing first" model that provides permanent housing with support services.[132]

Distasio stresses the importance of the research process, which should include gathering information by spending time in communities building relationships and participating in "talking circles." Residences for Aboriginal people should be affordable, support Aboriginal ownership and operation, accommodate traditional activities such as the preparation of wild game, accommodate healing and counselling programs and visits from elders, and accommodate multigenerational households. Long-term is needed, as homelessness is a long-term problem.[133]

Laird points out that a business case can be made for investing in ending poverty. Safe and affordable housing saves money and keeps people from slipping into deep poverty. Emergency shelters will still be needed while "housing first" strategies are being implemented. Funds need to be bridged, with less going to shelters as more is spent on permanent housing.[134] Money needs to be allocated to align existing services, so that people do not end up rapidly cycling through homelessness and multiple accommodations.[135] Shapcott supports Laird's arguments, pointing out that in Ontario, taxpayers pay 2.5 times as much for homeless shelters as for rent supplements. Shelters cost ten times as much as social housing, yet because government programs operate in silos that prevent effective coordination, shelter per diems cannot be converted to cost-effective subsidies.[136]

Noting that shelter offers an opportunity to address long-standing social problems, Laird suggests a national strategy to address the structural causes of homelessness, which would include income security, investment in affordable owner units, investment in affordable rental housing, rent supplements, and use of existing research, especially research into successful programs.[137]

Long-term strategic commitments can get people off the streets, reduce the numbers of at-risk poor, and provide savings at all levels of government by reducing amounts spent on emergency services.[138]

Condon and Newton recommend support services that help individuals and families deal with situations and disruptions they cannot handle on their own. Not only will these services will assist the distressed, they will also help individuals and families achieve independence, which will prevent homelessness. Condon and Newton propose the following framework for addressing homelessness:

- Increase the minimum wage so that the working poor will be able to afford shelter.
- Increase the income assistance shelter allowance to match actual housing cost.
- Support people transitioning from income assistance to working.
- Provide a continuum of housing, including temporary emergency and transitional housing, supportive permanent housing, and independent permanent housing.

As Condon and Newton say, "People who are homeless, even if they have complex needs and a long history of living on the streets, can be successfully housed if they are given the right supports when they want them."[139] For the most vulnerable Aboriginal people, this includes cultural support.

The Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) 2003 Aboriginal Homelessness Study makes the following observations:

- Prevention is more cost effective than emergency services.
- Clients will be best served if systematic outreach, assessment, and identification is maintained at appropriate locations.
- Affordable housing prevents homelessness.
- A continuum of housing is needed to address homelessness.
- An effective program for addressing Aboriginal homelessness will include:
    o Mental health services;
    o Health and dental services;
    o Community and family supports, including culturally appropriate family healing programs;
    o Peer support based on drop-in centres;
    o Employment and income support services, including training for self-sufficiency and places where a homeless person can be located by a potential employer;
    o Specialized Aboriginal services and programs, including addiction support;
    o System coordination for effective service delivery and improved client referral;
    o Culturally appropriate staffing and training;
    o Transportation for accessing employment and services; and
    o Research into the ways issues facing Aboriginal people interrelate.
- There is a lack of adequate resources in subregions to which Aboriginal people tend to migrate.
- Funding adequate to last through the winter months must be found through partnerships and is an important component of continuity of services.[140]

6. Aboriginal organizations should serve the Aboriginal homeless

Homeless Aboriginal people feel alienated and disconnected from government programs designed to serve the general population. Aboriginal organizations are more trusted by Aboriginal people and are easier for Aboriginal people to approach. They are staffed by people who understand through personal experience what the Aboriginal homeless are going through.

Homeless programs must consider Aboriginal culture when designing programs. Distasio suggests a holistic approach[141] because housing represents more than just shelter. Housing must incorporate a range of services to assist Aboriginal people to live independently. In addition, housing must address the short- and long-term needs of Aboriginal people migrating to the city.

Jenny Kwan, the MLA for Vancouver–Mount Pleasant, is an advocate for the homeless in general and the Aboriginal homeless in particular. Recognizing that it "is estimated that there are over ten thousand homeless people in our communities, of which thirty-two per cent are Aboriginal, and amongst women, fifty per cent," she announced that "the opposition leader and I met with representatives from the Aboriginal Transformative Justice Project, where they once again raised the desperate need for additional Aboriginal-specific services, housing, and homeless shelter."[142]

Rich Coleman acknowledged AHMA's effectiveness in addressing Aboriginal homelessness in British Columbia. "I have to give the First Nations community in British Columbia credit on this, because they did step up to the plate in relationship with the Aboriginal Housing Management Association and their friendship centres to come into the proposal call and start to get these built. We are the only jurisdiction in the country that has actually got the money and the proposals out the door to satisfy the federal funding—which is a credit, frankly, to AHMA, which is the Aboriginal Housing Management Association, and BC Housing working together to do that."[143]

Walker points out that it "is helpful to think of self-government as a right that is subsumed by the more fundamental and basic right of self-determination." Self-determination and self-government goes hand-in-hand with addressing the disproportionate need of Aboriginal people for social welfare goods. The disparities between Aboriginal and mainstream society are best resolved by Aboriginal leadership. Ensuring that Aboriginals are included in the economy and in urban society requires greater Aboriginal self-determination.[144]

Aboriginal organizations are uniquely able to understand the need for a mix of transitional and permanent housing to accommodate the cyclical short- and long-term needs of migratory urban Aboriginal Canadians.[145] Condon and Newton remind us that housing is more than shelter and Aboriginal organizations are best suited to undertake the holistic approach of incorporating into housing programs the various services that enable Aboriginal people to sustain an independent lifestyle in urban areas.[146] Programs for Aboriginal people that are designed, delivered, and governed by Aboriginal people are more popular and have better outcomes.[147]

The Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy recognizes that funding for programs for homeless Aboriginal Canadians should flow through Aboriginal organizations. These organizations can provide appropriate housing and culturally sensitive services. Among the needs are Aboriginal elders available in shelters, and services to help people move forward to stable

housing and community integration. The strategy notes that the opening of the Aboriginal Friendship Centre's emergency shelter brought in a flood of homeless Aboriginal people. When asked why they came, they said that they were treated with respect. They felt like the staff treated them like guests in their homes.[148]

The needs of homeless Aboriginal Canadians will not be addressed in their entirety unless Aboriginal organizations take the initiative. The Canadian Housing and Renewal Association recently published a policy position paper on homelessness with no mention of Aboriginal homelessness, despite irrefutable evidence that Aboriginal people are over-represented in the homeless and at-risk populations across Canada. In addition, the Metro Vancouver Community Plan for the HPS does not list the Aboriginal homeless as a priority group, despite the fact they compose one-third of the Metro Vancouver homeless population.

How AHMA can help fill the gaps

Walker warns of the risk that non-Aboriginal organizations will end up delivering Aboriginal-specific programs because they have the capacity to "do for" the Aboriginal community. The fear is that these programs will be approached as charities with need-based participation, rather than be designed to meet Aboriginal needs and aspirations through processes that respect Aboriginal self-government and self-determination.[149] AHMA has a proven track record working in cooperation with other organizations to develop proposals that meet the requirements for government funding while addressing Aboriginal needs and goals.

Canada needs strategies that end homelessness, not just manage it. Funding for Aboriginal homelessness projects has been lost because of delays in Aboriginal groups applying and establishing eligibility for funding. A lead agency, such as AHMA, to make sure requirements are met and distribute funding would avert these problems.[150] In a study of local plans to end homelessness, fifty-four per cent of the plans identified a body that would be responsible for implementing the plan.[151] A shared database on the Aboriginal homeless population also needs to be developed by the Aboriginal community.[152]

Aboriginal people are over-represented among the homeless with SAMI (about thirty per cent), so supported housing geared toward Aboriginal people is badly needed. Canada needs to find ways to effectively develop and deliver this housing. While there is a serious dearth of research on the demographics and needs of homeless Aboriginals, there are strong indications that supported housing should involve Aboriginal elders in support services and focus on the health of the entire community, not just the individual. The province of British Columbia recognizes that the needs of Aboriginal households are significant and out of proportion to the needs of the general population. The province has already begun working with Aboriginal organizations to address these needs.[153]

The plan developed by the Leadership Table on Homelessness has three main components:

- Basing programs on a "housing first" philosophy;
- Providing the necessary supports to enable the chronically homeless to remain off the streets; and
- Engaging the community in cooperating to provide housing and support services to the chronically homeless by building understanding about chronic homelessness.[154]

This plan does not have an Aboriginal-specific component. This omission underscores the need for the knowledge of Aboriginal people and communities possessed by Aboriginal organizations like AHMA.

Next steps

A great deal has been learned about Aboriginal homelessness, but a great deal is left to be discovered before we can address the problem with assurance. One of the most important contributions Aboriginal organizations such as AHMA can make is to continue with this ongoing research, especially research into demographics. This research should lead to and be part of the preparation of a comprehensive policy paper on Aboriginal homelessness, which would incorporate lessons already learned into a proposal for effective intervention into the cycle of Aboriginal homelessness. The ultimate goal of this policy paper would be the development and implementation of an effective national Aboriginal homelessness strategy.

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