

# Finding Home

Policy Options for Addressing  
Homelessness in Canada

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 E-book

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## Chapter 6.1

### Housing for Aboriginal Children and Youth: The Need for a Holistic Approach

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Now, I understand what you're saying in terms of looking at housing as a key factor that affects the development of children and youth. That's an honourable undertaking you might say, but I always insist that people try to overcome the western European approach of categorizing and individualizing various areas of social existence. You have social control. You have the related criminal justice system. So you have the judge and the policemen, lawyer and so on. Then you have the church and all its related exercises. Then you have the schools, universities and so on. And they don't seem to be really related. I have to remind people that our traditional approach to our existence has been based on recognition that everything is related and inter-related and I don't think you can really get away from that. In that context, then, I would not choose to speak of how housing, by itself, affects children and youth. But I think we have to take the approach that housing is one of the key and basic essentials of life. (Charlie Hill, Executive Director, National Aboriginal Housing Association)

Inadequate Aboriginal housing can be viewed as both cause and effect of poverty, low educational attainment, high unemployment rates, poor health, and outcomes involving children in care and the justice system.

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Canada's Aboriginal population is younger and growing at a faster rate than the total population. This factor contributes to an even greater need for new housing. Additionally, some Aboriginal households require housing for an extended family which generates specific housing needs.

Another important consideration which is part cause and part effect of the housing crisis is the demographic trend indicating that Aboriginal people are changing residences both within cities and in and out of cities at a more frequent rate than the overall population. This high rate of churn among the urban Aboriginal population is having adverse effects on individuals, families, communities, and service providers. As noted in one recent study:

Many social programs that provide services to urban Aboriginal populations, such as health, family support and counseling, and education, are designed on a neighbourhood basis to ensure a coordinated response to multi-faceted family and individual needs. Frequent mobility among Aboriginal families can result in discontinuity or disruption of service provision, with negative consequences for the family and service provision agencies. Discontinuity in service provision can be especially pronounced among high-need families such as those of lone female parents, who are among the most mobile, yet often in the most need (Clatworthy & Norris, 2007, p. 228).

As the independent indigenous submission to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural rights in response to Canada's periodic reports has noted,

The issue of aboriginal housing is not simply a matter of differences in living standards. Overcrowded and dilapidated houses pose a significant threat to the physical health of aboriginal people to TB, diabetes, and obesity. Psychologically inadequate housing among aboriginals reinforces a sense of marginalization and hopelessness. Furthermore adequate and affordable housing is essential to the stability children need to perform well in school; the need to move frequently hurts a child's social and academic development (INET, 2006, p. 36).

Aboriginal housing needs must be viewed holistically; all too often however, they are not. Nor do housing programs and policies for Aboriginal peoples even provide adequate shelter.

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### Aboriginal Households (Non-Reserve)

While the percentage of Aboriginal households in need has declined since 1996, it remained extremely high at 25 percent of all households in 2001. The absolute number of households in core need has risen from almost 70,000 to 74,000 between 1996 and 2001. Inuit households, as of 2001, were twice as likely to fall into core housing need as non-Aboriginal households (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), 2004a, p. 19).

Households that have to spend more than 30 percent of their income to find adequate and suitable housing in their local housing market are considered to be in core housing need. Adequate housing means the dwelling has basic plumbing facilities and is not in need of major repair. Suitable housing means there are enough bedrooms for the size and make-up – age and sex – of the family (City of Toronto, 2006, p. 21).

Housing costs are greater as a percentage of income for Aboriginal people, mainly because, on average, Aboriginal household incomes lag those of non-Aboriginal households. According to the 2001 Census, Aboriginal households reported an average 19.9 percent less than non-Aboriginal households. Yet Aboriginal households average shelter costs (\$705) were only 8 percent lower than the average shelter costs (\$766) of non-Aboriginal households. As a result, Aboriginal households spent more of their income on shelter relative to non-Aboriginal households, and a greater percentage fell into core housing need (CMHC, 2004b).

At the same time, the quality of Aboriginal housing is far inferior to that of non-Aboriginal households. In an examination of non-reserve housing, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) showed while non-reserve Aboriginal families represent only 2.8 percent of all families, they make up 4.8 percent of those in core housing need. This figure rises to over 22 percent in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where about 10 percent of all households are Aboriginal (CMHC, 2004b, p. 3).

In large cities, the need is even greater than in small urban centres. Almost 25 percent of Aboriginal households in census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations were in core housing need in 2001 compared to 20 percent in small urban centres (CMHC, 2004b, p. 3).

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Inuit people have been particularly hard hit in housing, as funding is often apportioned by population numbers and as a small proportion of all Aboriginal peoples, Inuit often receive little money. Lack of local materials for housing, as well as high transportation costs, make housing construction even more expensive than in other areas. Inuit are most likely to face overcrowding. In 2001, 20 percent of Inuit households were crowded followed by 10 percent for First Nations on-reserve and only 2 percent for the non-Aboriginal population (ITK, 2005).

As Okalik Egeesiak, Director of the Socio-Economic Development Department of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, commented, "It is kind of hard to study for anything when you have three or four generations living in one house... [and] with so many people living in the house and poor circulation, that compounds the health status of everybody in the house."

Maria Wilson, Training and Development Coordinator of the Socio-Economic Development Department of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, adds:

I think when speaking of Inuit and the North, most Canadians do not realize how different it is to do anything there. It's very expensive to bring building materials if one has to fly everything in. It is estimated that \$9 billion is required to meet current need for housing in Nunavut. So how much of it is actually to buy building supplies and how much is to pay to bring it all into communities? And the population growth as you may have heard, 60 percent of the population is under the age of 25.

ITK (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami) has linked overcrowding to poor health, especially for infants, and to the transmission of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis (25 times the Canadian average for Inuit) as well as increasing the risk of injuries, mental health problems, family tension, and violence. "These stressors are powerful triggers for negative coping behaviors such as dependence on alcohol and drugs" (ITK, 2005, p. 5). A report prepared for ITK also noted, "Many Inuit offenders had difficult home environments during childhood, including exposure to violence and substance abuse" (Trevethan et al., 2004).

Overcrowding leads to stressful homes and no space for children to study, so they skip school more often and have poorer education results. Overcrowding also contributes to spousal abuse and other crimes.

Alastair MacPhee, a childcare expert with the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, sums it up succinctly: "Access to good-quality housing is

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essential for the well-being of Aboriginal children and the federal government should undertake a national housing strategy for all Aboriginal peoples.”

### Homelessness

Young people make up a crucial component of the homeless population and Aboriginal youth are over-represented in this group. Studies indicate Aboriginal people as a whole are over-represented among all homeless people “in every major city where statistics are available” (CMHC, 2004a, p. 3). In the North and in other rural areas the problem is often hidden and overcrowding or “couch surfing” are the methods by which it is concealed.

As noted by Dr. Cathy Richardson, a Métis psychologist, “So what are people on the lower end doing? Many of these people are becoming homeless and that certainly is affecting a lot of Métis.”

Interviews conducted with Aboriginal street youth for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) found that for Aboriginal youth, their cultural background, history, structural conditions, and experience on the street were different from those of other street youth. Many experienced racism, in addition to the stigma encountered by all street people. The youth also spoke of identity confusion and self-hatred, dislocation from home, difficulty in reunification and ignorance of Aboriginal rights, history, and culture (RCAP, 1997).

Some of the key indicators are:

- in Calgary, Aboriginal people make up 2 percent of the city’s population but 17 percent of the homeless population;
- in Edmonton, Aboriginal people make up 4 percent of the city’s population but about 37 percent of the homeless population;
- in Ottawa, Aboriginal youth are 18 percent of the population of homeless male youth and 19 percent of homeless female youth, but only 2 percent of the population of Ottawa is Aboriginal (CMHC, 2001).

Garry Jobin, Coordinator of BladeRunners in Vancouver (a program that matches construction labour needs with disadvantaged, street-involved youth, about 95 percent of whom are Aboriginal), observes:



A lot of our kids are dealing with homelessness. So, you have to know all the community agencies. If you're dealing with a kid that's kicked out on the street at 1:30 in the morning and is at the corner of Main and Hastings with all his clothes, you need to come in and know how to deal with that right away, and know who to call to get that young person housing, or you're going to lose them immediately.

Adds Charlie Hill:

You have to admit, and the research supports the fact, that Aboriginal people are the worst housed in Canada. There are programs that were helpful, but they were capped. Like the CMHC cap on new social housing in 1993. It was a successful program. The membership of the National Aboriginal Housing Association acquired about 11,000 housing units up until '93 but after that then there was a waiting list at the time but it has grown and grown. More and more people have become homeless. Homeless people start to include single parents and families, then it's really time to take a hard look at how come this is resulting. Now this isn't just limited to Aboriginal peoples. But the Aboriginal people are the worst of the worst. After 1993, the existing subsidies at that time still continued except when the mortgages are terminating, then there's no more subsidy. So then the rents have to go up which has an impact on the families. In that case, it's a vicious circle.

Aboriginal youth are over-represented among the homeless population in Canada. Given the demographics of a burgeoning youthful Aboriginal population combined with a shortage of adequate Aboriginal housing, there is an immediate need for increased housing supports, or the Aboriginal homeless population may be expected to grow.

### First Nations On-Reserve

According to Hill, between housing on- and off-reserve,

...there's not all that much difference. If you've got the economic base, you can support a house. Without the economic base, you'll find it very, very hard to support a house. I'm not talking about a home, I'm talking about houses. The major difference, of course, is the type of tenure. The fact that Canada holds the title to the land. I mean, I don't know how they arrived at that. They came over and said, "This is our land, but you can stay here if you want." It seems kind of ironic, but anyway, that's what happened and they put us on reserves. People say that was to protect us,

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but it wasn't really. They fully expected us to die off as a people. If we wanted to leave the reserve and live elsewhere then we had to become what they call enfranchised and you had to pretend that you were not an "Indian." And so when people say, "Well, yeah, you chose to go and live on the reserves," that's not true. We were forced to go on the reserves and if you look around anyplace right now, it's all the worst land and we were forced into those territories. A lot of people don't know that up until 1951, we had to have passes to leave the reserve.

CMHC noted that in 2001, 22.5 percent of on-reserve Aboriginal households were living in inadequate housing and in core housing need compared to 2.5 percent of non-Aboriginal households (CMHC, 2004a). The federal government has openly acknowledged the shortfall in reserve housing. In October 2006, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) reported:

Overcrowding and inadequate housing are of particular concern on-reserve, where there is a current housing shortage of between 20,000 and 35,000 units. The shortfall is growing by an estimated 2,200 units a year (INAC, 1997).

CMHC also noted,

As of March 2004, INAC [Indian and Northern Affairs Canada] reported a total of 95,479 dwelling units on-reserve, of which 16,878 required major repairs and 5,199 needed replacement. On-reserve housing shortages are currently estimated at 20,000 units, with an additional 4,500 new units needed annually to meet the requirements of new households (CMHC, 2004a, p. 4).

In recent years, in spite of these pressing needs, new on-reserve housing has declined or stagnated. In 2002–2003, only 1,889 homes were built, down from 4,254 in 1993–94. The number of renovated dwellings has barely changed, from 4,126 in 1993–94 to 4,224 in 2002–2003 (INAC, 2004, p. 61).

Housing challenges include such inexcusable conditions as bad water and lack of sewage services. Indeed, the Assembly of First Nations has indicated,

Currently [in 2006], almost 12 percent of First Nations communities have to boil their drinking water. Six percent of First Nations homes – over



5,000 homes – are without sewage services. Almost 1,600 homes lack hot water, cold water, or flushing toilets (CBC News, 2006).

There were 89 First Nations communities under either “boil water” or “do not drink” advisories as of June 8, 2007 (Health Canada, 2007). These conditions have negative effects that go beyond the physical health of the individual and extend to all elements of community wellness.

### **Aboriginal Women And Housing**

Many First Nations women and their children face a particular legal issue in terms of housing. Arising from the distribution of powers in the *Constitution Act, 1867*, provincial or territorial law governs how assets of a marriage or common-law relationship are to be divided upon breakdown, including real property such as a house. The legislation generally provides for equal division between spouses.

However, these laws do not apply on-reserve, as a result of subsection 91(24) of the *Constitution Act, 1867* which gives the federal government exclusive law-making authority over “Indians, and lands reserved for the Indians.” this has been interpreted to mean that provincial and territorial matrimonial property laws do not apply to real property on-reserve. Since there are no federal provisions in the *Indian Act* or elsewhere that fill in this matrimonial property gap, people living on-reserve generally have no legal system for resolving issues relating to land and houses upon a breakdown of their relationship.

Thus, First Nations women currently have no right in law to certain assets on-reserve where their marriage breaks down, unlike all other women in Canada; they and their children are therefore left with no legal claim to occupy the family residence. They may be forced to leave the matrimonial home and due to acute housing shortages, may also have to leave the reserve. Where family violence is involved, the woman and her children are rendered all the more vulnerable by this gap; sometimes remaining with the abuser for lack of an alternative (Mann, 2005).

The human rights of First Nations women and their children are violated and they are discriminated against when they are unable to exercise rights they would have off-reserve (Mann, 2005).



First Nations women want an avenue of redress and effective enforcement mechanisms for matrimonial matters involving real property on-reserve. Some Aboriginal people want the repeal of provisions in the *Canadian Human Rights Act* preventing its protections from applying on-reserve. That would allow women some recourse if they believed a Band Council's decision involving housing was discriminatory.

As Dr. Richardson observes, for Aboriginal women everywhere, violence, poverty, and housing are closely linked,

Courts are deciding that if a woman is in a transition house because she had to leave her family home that is pretty unstable, so often they would decide to put children with the assaulting spouse, the father, the child's Dad, because he might still have a home. So women are bearing a disproportionate responsibility for violence in families which is often used against them. So again, the issues of being vulnerable or subjected to violence they often relate to housing that is safe. You don't have a good place to live; you know children are removed from mothers due to poverty as well as being the victims of violence. For me, I would call that another human rights abuse. These issues are all related to violence and child welfare, human rights and how we are dealing with families.

It is also noteworthy that Inuit women are often tenants of their homes, with the man's name on the lease, also resulting in great difficulty in removing a male perpetrator of violence from the home (Mann, 2005).

### **Lone parenting**

Aboriginal women are more likely to be lone parents compared to non-Aboriginal women. This means more will be in core housing need due to high urban housing costs for single-income families. Young women are often the most affected as lone parents. Nearly half (47 percent) of Aboriginal lone parents experience core housing needs.

Dr. Richardson observes the change in Métis family structures:

So what happened, in a very short time our families moved from being what we would call extended families or living more communally both in communities but within houses it was quite normal that grandparents might live with a family or an aunt or uncle. And so we moved from that situation maybe quite quickly to a period of a nuclear family to a time



when many of our families actually now are single-parent families living in urban settings or in small resource towns, so quite vulnerable to the flux of industries and facing a lot of issues related to poverty.

So when I think of what are the issues, well one issue certainly is housing. Architecture has never really helped the Métis, since 1885. So when families come to a city like Vancouver and they need to get an apartment, often it is one-bedroom where a mother will live with her children. And it's really hard to find apartments that are suitable for larger groups of people like an extended family. So I think housing is seriously related to other issues that link isolation, the need for quality childcare, peer support, and family support and for communities. Those kinds of things could really be supported in advance through proper community-based housing.

Inadequate housing, family violence and underlying poverty issues are closely inter-related with Aboriginal children being taken into care.

### Comprehensive Approaches

As with all indicators of Aboriginal child and youth poverty, housing does not stand alone but must rather be viewed as interconnected to all other elements of the experience of aboriginal peoples. Hill notes,

So I mentioned the social aspects, the cultural-linguistic aspect, the economic aspect, and the education aspect. All of these play a part in the success or lack of success in terms of housing. Over and above that is the whole question of racism that still exists. It's not just housing. You can't isolate housing and say that if you've got a good house that things will be great. There's this kind of stuff that you have to put up. There's that fact that the people, by and large, don't have any economic base with most of them coming from isolated communities so there's a language barrier. Low education. But there's racism on top of everything else.

The result, Hill notes, is that Aboriginal people who do obtain a well-paying job and move into a neighbourhood that's "all WASP," often run into discrimination, while what usually happens is that Aboriginal people wind up in the worst housing in a city:

... that lends itself to this repression and being put into a ghetto-type of situation. So if you're forced into a negative housing situation, there's overcrowding, there's a struggle to pay the rent, because you can't get a good job and there's also the social repression. One more thing is that



where there is a low-rent housing situation, usually that brings with it a bunch of other social ills. People who have not had a great opportunity whether they're white, Indian or black or what. This in turn lends itself to fostering not a very good attitude in terms of social responsibility. That's a nice way of saying there's a lot of troublemakers that hang around in low-rent areas. Now, this is not stereotyping, it's through experience.

Having said that, you still want to hang out with your own people. You don't want to abandon your own people and go and try to live elsewhere because you're not well-received. You get pretty darn lonely so you stay with your people, your culture. I think that it is very important that our people start speaking up more for themselves.

As always, funding, intergovernmental co-operation, and aboriginal control are major factors in the success or lack thereof in Aboriginal housing. According to Hill:

There's two things that I recommend that are essential. One is the increase of resources to help us acquire more housing units but the other thing is that it is essential that we be recognized as a people who can support ourselves in terms of administering houses and so on. I guess putting it another way is, Indian-controlled or Aboriginal control over their housing program.

And a holistic approach to housing means addressing more than just Aboriginal people having a place to call home, says Hill:

One of the things that the Urban Native Housing Program incorporated into its activities was the role of tenant counsellor. I think this role is one of the keys and is one of the major differences between the mainstream housing and the Aboriginal housing is that we do have tenant counsellors.

I think that the tenant counselling is one aspect, but there also have to be special provisions made to provide counselling for the kids by other Aboriginal people. I mean education that will bring to the attention of our Aboriginal kids the fact that all of this stuff has happened but here we are and we have to make a fresh start. To help them understand why people are like they are on one hand, but why they are treated the way they are on the other.

So, with regards to the youth I mean we are all children at one time, we were youth and we are adults. The difference is that we get to be bigger

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and stronger and you can start acting out. The one thing that I know has been instrumental in helping a lot of people find their feet again is their re-grasp or the revitalization of traditional teachings in their day-to-day life. I think that this is one of the areas that really has to be stressed.

Of course the housing groups are not in a position to provide that kind of instruction but if the tenant-counsellor position was either expanded or rendered more specific to dealing with children and youth then that might be one element that could be incorporated into the day-to-day activities of the tenant counsellor or person who is supposed to work with the tenants.

In addition to policy/program approaches pertaining to tenancy, says Hill,

Some people over the years have been able to move into well-paying jobs so they do have an economic base. I think that many are now in a position where they could carry mortgages if they don't have enough money to pay to buy a house outright, so I think this is the other area the federal government should really look at. In devising ways, working with banks and real estate people to give Aboriginal people a break in terms of relief in terms of interest and things like that, so that would help them to enter the home ownership area. I think that homeownership, in turn, makes a person feel better which is passed along to the kids but also people, non-native people start taking a different view, "Oh they have a house, they're just like us." But we're not like them, but we have to live in the same environment.

Keep in mind, the other thing is that we have been specifically excluded in the sharing of the resources of this country. The resources have been turned over directly to the provincial governments and it has only been recently, like the diamond mines, where our people have really insisted that they have a share of the resources that are extracted. In this context, if we could share the resources that are extracted then our people would then be, in fact, better-off and I think you have to admit that one reason Canadians have been well-off is because they had access and they took all the resources. So we're only a drop in the bucket in terms of population so it would be a simple matter to share some of the benefits from various resources which in turn then would help housing which in turn would help the kids.

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The well-being and future prospects for Aboriginal children and youth are so tied to housing that only a comprehensive long-term approach will fill the need.

## Conclusion

Aboriginal housing is substandard and inadequate at rates disproportionate to that experienced by the non-Aboriginal population; Aboriginal people and youth particularly are also over-represented in the homeless population.

As with all indicators of Aboriginal child and youth poverty, housing does not stand alone but must rather be viewed as interconnected to all other elements of the experience of aboriginal peoples, including racism and discrimination. Aboriginal housing issues must be approached through a holistic strategy. Adequate funding, intergovernmental cooperation, collaboration with aboriginal communities and a focus on community economic development are all important for housing adequacy and sustainability.

We have to build a more inclusive society where Aboriginal people can benefit. If we do not, an increasing rate of human misery—and militancy—is almost certainly to be expected. This doesn't serve anyone well. The National Council of Welfare is not an Aboriginal organization, but it has a unique mandate to advise the federal government on poverty and social development. From this perspective, we are making what we believe are important recommendations. We are not experts on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit issues, and our goal is to support and complement the recommendations already made in Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and beyond by Aboriginal organizations.

Canada is a rich country. Collectively, we have choices – far more choices than most Aboriginal children and youth can even imagine.

The NCW wants the federal, and other, governments to choose to:

1. Adopt a national anti-poverty strategy, as outlined in the NCW's solving poverty: four Cornerstones of a Workable national strategy for Canada. Aboriginal poverty cannot be solved in isolation from other Canadians who are also impoverished due to factors like disability, racism, sexism and lone-parenthood. And as highlighted repeatedly in this report, challenges facing Aboriginal people cannot

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be solved in isolation; everything is interconnected. The only way forward is a comprehensive strategy.

2. Adopt, within this national strategy, a specific long-term vision for Aboriginal peoples along with targets, timelines, indicators, inter-governmental coordination, and accountability to Aboriginal Canadians for results.
3. Include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in creating every part of the strategy, and guarantee that women have an equal say, especially in the interests of children, and that young women and men and girls and boys themselves will also have their voices heard.
4. Immediately invest sufficient resources to meet the basic needs of every Aboriginal child and young person, regardless of their status or where they live (food, clothing, drinkable water, safe housing, early learning and care, access to education and health care) through increased income and services that foster autonomy and dignity.

Poverty is a political choice. Social inclusion and well-being are equally possible. There are no excuses in this country to give in to the status quo.

*This is a summary of Chapter 6 and the concluding sections of Time to Act: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Children and Youth, a 2007 report by the National Council of Welfare. The full report is available in both English and French at [www.ncwcnbes.net](http://www.ncwcnbes.net). Reproduced with the permission of the Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2009.*

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