

RECOMMENDATION 6



REVIEW AND EXPAND INVESTMENT IN ABORIGINAL HOUSING BOTH ON AND OFF RESERVE

Summary

Aboriginal Peoples are disproportionately represented in the homeless population across Canada. Additionally, on-reserve housing is declining in quality, safety and adequacy at the same time that the population is growing dramatically. Our recommendation calls for an up-to-date audit of on-reserve housing conducted in cooperation with Aboriginal communities across Canada. It would assess the state of current on-reserve housing as well as determine the need for off-reserve Aboriginal housing. The federal government currently invests \$300 million annually in Aboriginal housing and we suggest that this amount continue until the audit is complete.

RECOMMENDATION COSTS: \$300 million in year one and remaining costs to be determined after audit of Aboriginal housing conditions.

Recommendation Details:

The fact that Aboriginal Peoples are more likely to experience homelessness than other Canadians is well established (Patrick, 2014; Belanger et al., 2012). While making up 4.3% of the total Canadian population, Aboriginal Peoples form a disproportionate percentage of the homeless population in communities across the country. They make up 16% of the homeless population in Toronto, 30% in Ottawa, 46% in Saskatoon, over 60% in Winnipeg and over 70% in Regina. In Canada, one cannot really discuss homelessness – and its solutions – without explicitly addressing Aboriginal homelessness.

We do know that the experience of colonialism (resulting in intergenerational trauma), poverty, violence (in particular, against women), as well as racism and discrimination undermine health, well-being and opportunities, as well as enhance the risk of homelessness.

The quality, safety and accessibility of appropriate housing on- and off-reserve is also without a doubt part of the problem. Most Canadians will be aware of the State of Emergency declared by the leadership of Attawapiskat First Nations in 2011 because of the concerns about the health, security, heating and safety conditions of the housing in the area, where many residents were living in tents, trailers and temporary shelters, as well as dangerously unsafe and crumbling housing plagued by mold and characterized by inadequate water and sewage. While there is great variation in the quality of Aboriginal housing across the country, this crisis highlighted what is a glaring national problem.

Currently, through Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) and CMHC, the federal government provides around \$303 million per year for on-reserve housing, which goes to build new housing and repair existing housing. According to the CMHC website:

“CMHC’s funding on-reserve supports the construction of an estimated 400 new homes, renovation of some 1,000 existing houses, ongoing subsidies to approximately 28,800 social housing units and supports First Nations to improve their capacity to build, manage, and maintain housing on-reserve. About \$116 million is also spent annually by CMHC to support the housing needs of Aboriginal individuals and families off-reserve” (CMHC, n.d.).

There are compelling reasons to question the adequacy of investments in housing. In a 2003 report, the Auditor General of Canada reviewed the state of Aboriginal on-reserve housing. Noting that the amount of housing was inadequate and that existing stock was deteriorating rapidly because of “substandard construction practices and materials, lack of proper maintenance, and overcrowding” (Auditor General of Canada, 2011:18). They suggested that there was a shortage of about 8,500 housing units and that about 44% of the existing housing required significant renovations. They also said there should be a focus on addressing mold and inadequate drinking water supplies. In a follow-up audit in 2011, the Auditor General noted that although AANDC and CMHC had made new investments in housing since 2003 “the investments have not kept pace with either the demand for new housing or the need for major renovation to existing units” (Auditor General of Canada, 2011:20). As an example, they found that in the 2008-09 fiscal year, the construction of new houses on reserves amounted to only 30% of the houses that actually needed to be replaced.

Compounding the problem is that the need for new housing and renovated units continues to rise rapidly on reserves. In five short years, the demand for new housing increased from 8,500 to over 20,000 (an increase of over 135%) and the housing units requiring major renovations went from 16,878 to 23,568 (an increase of over 40%) (Auditor General of Canada, 2011).

The reason for the increase in demand is twofold. First, existing housing is declining in quality, safety and adequacy. Second, Aboriginal populations are increasing rapidly, at a rate much faster than the rest of the population. Between 2006 and 2011, the Aboriginal population increased by over 20% (compared with 5.2% for the non-Aboriginal population) (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014). This also means that the Aboriginal population is very youthful; eventually these children and youth will require their own housing.

The lack of quality and accessible housing for Aboriginal Peoples currently has an impact on the homelessness crisis in Canada (Patrick, 2014; Belanger et al. 2012). Population growth combined with a declining housing stock suggest that in time, there will be greater migration to urban areas as people seek better opportunities and in all likelihood, the homelessness problem amongst Aboriginal people in Canada is projected to become much worse than it already is.

We also must not forget the challenges that Aboriginal Peoples face in accessing housing off-reserve. While the housing problems for Aboriginal Peoples off-reserve are similar to those of non-Aboriginal people – lack of access to safe and affordable housing – the problem is exacerbated by constant and ongoing discrimination (in both housing and employment), as well as impacts of inter-generational trauma and colonization. This has resulted in disproportionate amounts of Aboriginal Peoples experiencing homelessness in urban centers.

All of this indicates that prioritizing a strategic investment in Aboriginal housing is required. For this report, we are not prepared to identify a cost for this investment because we lack solid information about the full extent of the problem today and in the immediate future.

RECOMMENDATION: That the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, working in partnership with Aboriginal communities across the country, conduct an up-to-date audit of Aboriginal housing on-reserve, in order to:

- **Determine the number of new houses that need to be built in the short-term to meet immediate needs.**
- **Assess the number of housing units that need to be repaired to meet standards of safety and adequacy according to National Occupancy Standards, in order to meet immediate needs.**
- **Identify the needs for off-reserve housing.**
- **Project these needs over a ten-year period to account for current and anticipated population growth.**
- **Provide a realistic estimate of the investment required over ten years to meet the needs of Aboriginal Peoples.**

As well, we suggest that the government continue its existing funding commitment of \$300 million annually until this audit is completed and a proposed spending framework is in place. This allows time to determine future fiscal needs based on the suggested audit.

RECOMMENDATION: Continue committed funding of \$300 million (2015/16) to allow time to complete audit as outlined and determine future fiscal needs.