

Methodological challenges in studying urban Aboriginal homelessness

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ABSTRACT: *Aboriginal people comprise a disproportionate percentage of the homeless population in many cities in Canada, the United States and Australia. Their experiences can be traced to past and present policies of assimilation and colonialism. To end homelessness it is imperative that the paths into and out of homelessness for Aboriginal populations be understood. We discuss the challenges faced when studying urban Aboriginal populations, based on three studies conducted in a Canadian city. These deal with intersecting aspects of methodology including sampling, Aboriginal identity, lack of services governed by Aboriginal peoples, variability in social and political context within and between locations, participation of Aboriginal people in knowledge translation, and ethical practices. We conclude that community-based research provides the most opportunity for addressing these challenges.*

KEYWORDS: Aboriginal, Canada, colonialism, community-based research, ethics, governance, homelessness, Indigenous, policy, services, urban

Aboriginal¹ homelessness is a serious public health challenge in many Canadian cities where there are policy goals to end homelessness. Therefore it is important that researchers engaging either quantitative or qualitative methodologies consider the challenges to accurately describing this sub-population. Presently, it is difficult to be accurate on the number of homeless people at any point in time as different methods are used to arrive at estimates. According to *counts* conducted in some cities, the number of homeless people steadily increased up to 2008; however, absence of both a standard definition of homelessness and a commonly accepted enumeration method prevent development of accurate national statistics (Echenberg & Jensen, 2008; HRSDC, 2012). In any case, each city should strive to measure all sub-populations equitably. According to many counts, Aboriginal peoples² are overrepresented among the homeless in Canadian cities,

including Calgary (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2011; Chopin & Wormith, 2008; Hanselmann, 2001; Hwang, 2001; Stroick, Hubac, & Richter-Salomons, 2008). The 2008 *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary* indicated that Aboriginal people comprised 15% of the homeless population compared to comprising 2.5% of the Calgary population (Stroick et al., 2008) pointing to the possibility of inequities among populations. However, it is also likely that the number of Aboriginal homeless is grossly underestimated as this population is also overrepresented among the 'hidden homeless' (Distasio, Sylvestre, & Mulligan, 2005; Stroick et al., 2008). While it is important that counts by sub-populations be accurate for policy making, perhaps a more important point is the need to understand the particular needs of a significant sub-population so that programs and services to end homelessness are successful. In studying urban homelessness affecting Aboriginal peoples, however, we have learned that methodological challenges may be significant. In addition, these methodological challenges are exacerbated by a history of colonialism and the need for post-colonial understandings and methodologies (Smylie, Kaplan-Myrth, & McShane, 2009).

Having done three studies related to urban Aboriginal homelessness, we have identified methodological challenges in this area

¹ Aboriginal in Canada refers to status and non-status Indians according to the Indian Act, First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples.

² In Canada, there are over 50 distinct First Nations (AFN, 2013) and therefore there is no pan-Canadian identity or culture. We choose to pluralize people when referring to Aboriginals, even though grammatically incorrect, to avoid the tendency in the literature to homogenize Aboriginal experience which supports colonialist agendas.

of research that could be considered in planning future studies aimed at ending homelessness. In the following sections we first briefly describe the three studies. We then describe the methodological challenges grouped under five headings: (1) sampling frames and sampling services; (2) identification of Aboriginal homeless people; (3) variability in social and political context; (4) participation of Aboriginal peoples in dissemination and policy development; and (5) the ethical principles of the Tri-Council policy and the First Nations Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP) guideline. We conclude that community-based research (CBR) is presently the best solution to meeting these challenges.

Three studies of urban Aboriginal homelessness

The first study, referred to here as Project 1, involved an environmental scan of housing services specific to Aboriginal people in Calgary, AB; a review of the literature on Aboriginal homelessness; and a gathering of stakeholders from community organizations with structured discussions and note taking regarding a research agenda (Turner et al., 2010). The second study, Project 2, involved an evaluation of the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary's Homeless Outreach and Cultural Reconnection Program including interviews, document review, and the analysis of the program's database of activities (Oelke, 2011). The third study, Project 3, involved seven census metropolitan areas (CMAs) in Western Canada: Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Regina, Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, and Victoria. The goal was to identify the most effective policies, procedures, and practices for working with Aboriginal peoples who experience homelessness. A database describing services existing in the cities was created, a sample of these was contacted for interviews, a smaller sample was selected for case study, and a survey of readiness to engage in change was done in Calgary (Thurston, Turner, Oelke, & Bird, 2011). All three projects received approval from the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board (CHREB).

SAMPLING FRAMES AND SAMPLING SERVICES

In general, it may be difficult to get a list that represents the homelessness services in a city or region, and it may be even more difficult to locate specific Aboriginal serving organizations from which to sample participants. While some cities and organizations have lists of regional housing services for Aboriginal people that have been disseminated to clients or networks, we found that when Projects 1 and 3 were proposed, none of these lists was used broadly or uniformly across any Census Metropolitan Area [CMAs, as defined by Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006)] or province. In other words, no province had an agreed upon list of services, particularly one indicating whether Aboriginal clients were welcomed in the service. Therefore, Project 3 began with the development of a database of organizations providing housing services or services to the homeless that included Aboriginal people in each city. An internet search and a review of lists provided by governments, housing agencies or others yielded the majority of the agencies. This preliminary list was circulated for verification; that is, a city-specific letter and the list from the database of services for that city was sent to each organization on the list with a request for revisions, additions, and other feedback. Through this process, eleven organizations were added and of these, three (30%) provided Aboriginal specific services and two (20%) were governed by Aboriginals. This suggests Aboriginal specific services may be less likely to be included in networks and formal lists.

A small number of organizations do not serve Aboriginal peoples and this may be a challenge depending on the study design; for our projects it was not a problem. The database we developed was populated with information gained through organization web sites and follow-up phone calls to the organizations. Specifically, we sought 29 types of information under four headings: Organization information; housing services and programs provided; populations served; and size of program. Twenty-seven organizations were removed from the list because they did not serve Aboriginal peoples, the focus was not homeless

people (e.g., student housing), or we could not contact them, suggesting they may no longer exist. The number of organizations removed was relatively even across cities and the largest reason for exclusion was that homelessness was not a focus.

In some cities, finding Aboriginal specific services to act as champions, to follow in case studies, or to aid in recruitment may be a problem; the extent will vary according to where the study is done. In Project 3, when asked if the organization was specifically for Aboriginal peoples, the majority (77%) said no, and this was similar across cities (Table 1). Winnipeg had the most Aboriginal specific services but the differences between cities were not statistically significant.

Given the small number of Aboriginal specific services, finding a variety of models of service to Aboriginal peoples to study may be a challenge. Figure 1 shows that Aboriginal specific advocacy or referral, transitional housing, or long-term housing were more common than Aboriginal specific shelter services overall, and there was variability among cities in the patterns of distributions of services; for example, the proportion of Advocacy and Referral services was not consistently linked to that of Long-term Housing. The mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients was reflected in reports by organizations of what proportion of their clientele were Aboriginal. Calgary and Vancouver were more likely to have services where <25% of their client population was Aboriginal (Figure 2). All cities had <10% of organizations that served only Aboriginal people (95–100%). The search for best practices with Aboriginal people will be limited by the small number and variety of services specifically available for them.

IDENTIFICATION OF ABORIGINAL HOMELESS PEOPLE

Services and researchers must depend on Aboriginal peoples to self-identify when studies are being conducted. In all three projects we learned that not all organizations ask for ethnic background or keep formal detailed statistics on the characteristics of people served. When people make a guess of what proportion of clients are Aboriginal, they may over- or under-estimate based on their own biases about 'who looks Aboriginal'. As indicated in the previous section, organizations reported their percentage of Aboriginal clientele as anywhere from <5% to the maximum 100%, though there were few in the latter category. In Figure 2, however, about 35% of organizations in Calgary reported that they served from 51–99% Aboriginal clients. One of the challenges is that some Aboriginal people do not wish to self-identify even if asked. They may not value their Aboriginal identity or they may fear, as we learned in Project 1, that they will experience racism and discrimination in a service if they identify as Aboriginal. Some may have not grown up in an Aboriginal family with an Aboriginal identity due to the mass removal of Aboriginal children from their parents in the 1960s (Cowie, 2010). In addition, many Aboriginal people are suspicious of research in general due to past experiences in their communities (Kovach, 2009; Martin, 2008). If there are differential rates of self-identification due to certain past experiences, this could skew counts and exclude some people from other studies when recruiting.

VARIABILITY IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

In Project 3 we learned that the social and political contexts in which Aboriginal peoples experience homelessness in Western Canadian cities

TABLE 1: PROPORTION OF ABORIGINAL SPECIFIC SERVICES BY CITY

	Calgary	Edmonton	Regina	Saskatoon	Vancouver	Victoria	Winnipeg	Total
Number of Aboriginal specific services & proportion of total for city	9 (21%)	7 (23%)	4 (20%)	4 (25%)	8 (20%)	2 (10%)	10 (38%)	44 (23%)
Proportion of all Western Aboriginal specific services in each city	9 (20%)	7 (16%)	4 (9%)	4 (9%)	8 (18%)	2 (4%)	10 (23%)	44 (100%)

Chi Square = 5.604; df = 6; p = 0.469.

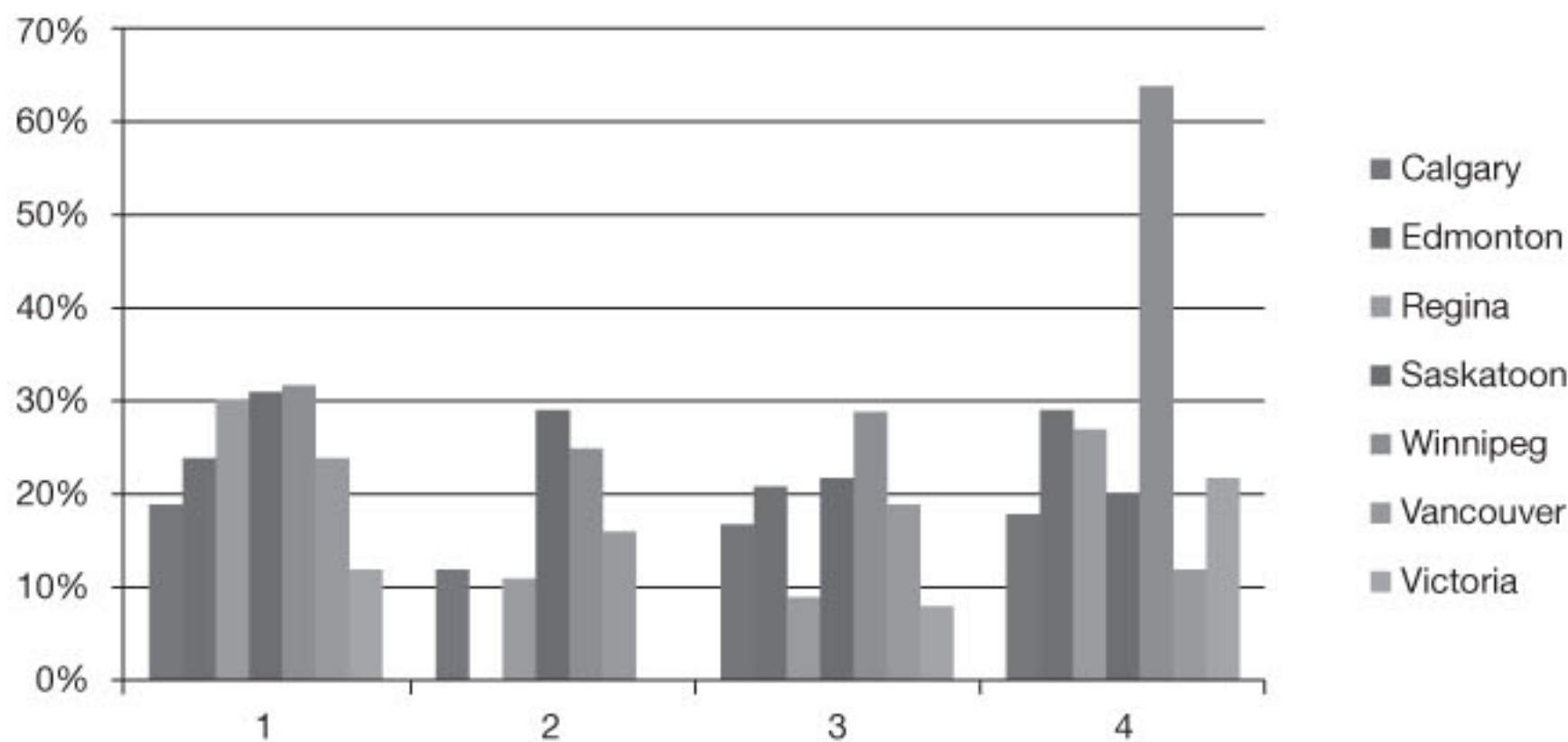


FIGURE 1: PROPORTION OF ABORIGINAL SPECIFIC SERVICES BY TYPE OF SERVICE AND CITY.
(1, Advocacy & referral; 2, shelter; 3, transitional housing; 4, long-term housing)

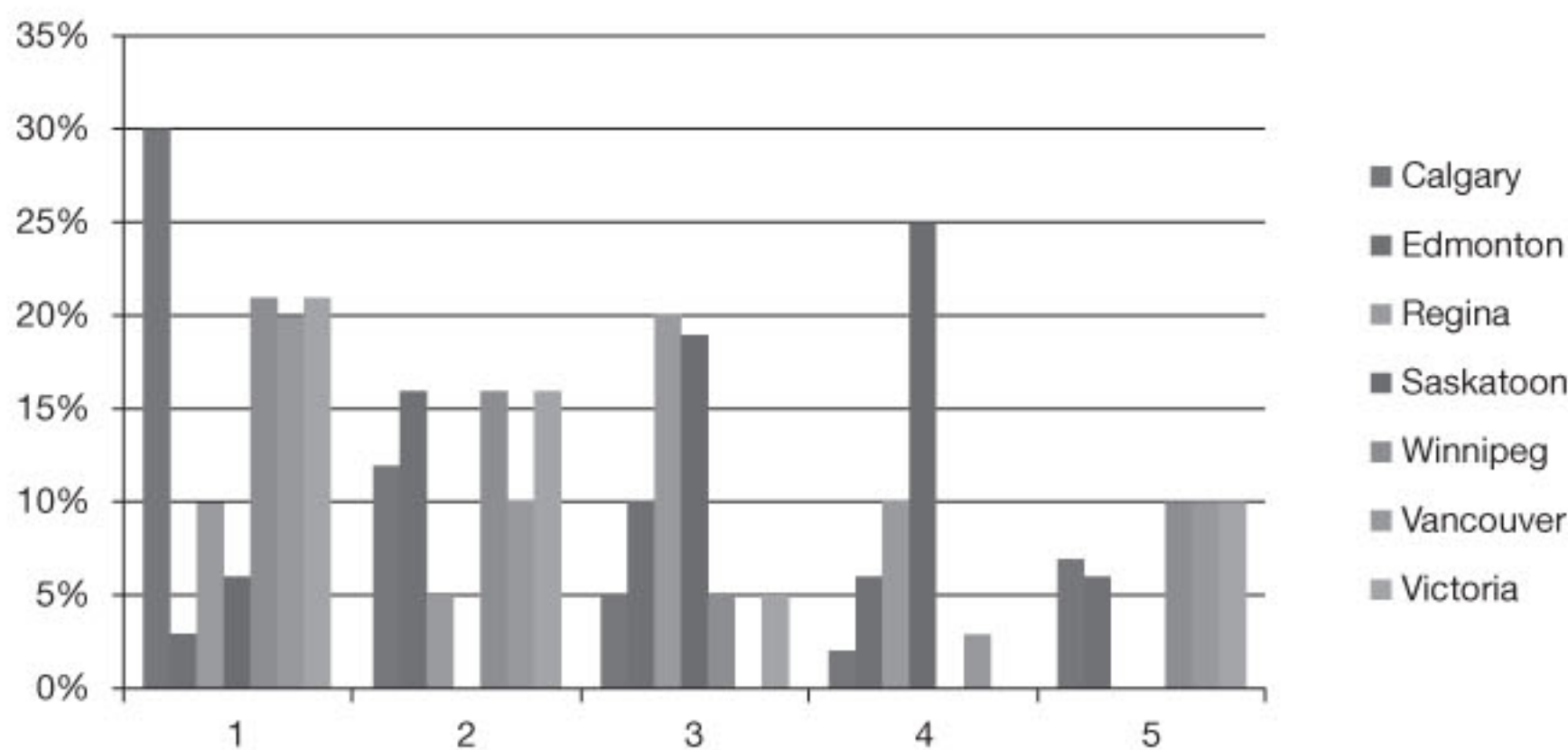


FIGURE 2: PROPORTION OF ABORIGINAL CLIENTS REPORTED SERVED BY ORGANIZATIONS BY CITY.
(1, 0-25%; 2, 26-50%; 3, 51-75%; 4, 76-99%; 5, 100%)

vary greatly, making comparisons challenging. The four provinces included in this study have very different histories and many geographic and political differences that must be considered when making comparisons between cities. As Table 2 indicates, the total population of each province differs significantly, and the absolute number of people whom self-identify as Aboriginal peoples varies by 50,000. We would add that Aboriginal peoples and their historic and present relations with the non-Aboriginal peoples also shape the features of the city (Kirmayer, Tait, & Simpson, 2009). Therefore, what one sees in a city is reflective of relationships developed over time, and as such, generalizations about the experiences of

Aboriginal peoples in urban areas are difficult to make and should be avoided. This makes it a challenge to advance a national agenda or policy; however, program success depends heavily on attention to context (Patton, 1987, 1997) and therefore cannot be ignored.

PARTICIPATION OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN DISSEMINATION AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The number of organizations available to provide representatives to participate as community-based researchers and in knowledge dissemination and policy development is limited. In Project 3 we learned that there were a small number of organizations with an Aboriginal governance structure;

that is, that Aboriginal people made up the majority of structures such as boards (Table 3). Governance and whether specific programs for Aboriginal peoples were offered were statistically related (Table 4); that is, the majority (64%) of organizations with Aboriginal specific programs were NGOs governed by Aboriginal peoples.

It is also critical to point out that many First Nations relate to their Federal counterparts in Treaty rights, not to municipal governments, and there are other 'jurisdictional' issues that problematize the relations of First Nations peoples

to their urban neighbors. One critical issue is self-government and another is unsettled land claims. In addition, housing on-Reserve is the responsibility of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada while the Department of Health Canada, First Nations, Inuit and Aboriginal Health provides health care to First Nations peoples who reside both on- and off-Reserves as long as they are listed as Band members, though health care provision to other residents of Canada is otherwise a provincial mandate. Therefore, the researcher who is naïve to macro- and meso-level politics

TABLE 2: POPULATIONS OF CENSUS METROPOLITAN AREAS (CMA)

	Calgary	Edmonton	Regina	Saskatoon	Vancouver	Victoria	Winnipeg
Population of CMA	1,070,295	1,024,825	192,435	230,855	2,097,960	325,060	686,035
Aboriginal population of CMA	26,575	52,100	17,105	21,535	40,310	10,905	68,385
Percent of population of Aboriginal descent	2.5	5.1	8.9	9.3	1.9 ¹ 6.5 ²	3.4	10.0

¹Greater Vancouver; ²proportion in Vancouver and North Vancouver (population ~600,000).

TABLE 3: TYPE OF ORGANIZATIONAL GOVERNANCE BY CITY

	Calgary	Edmonton	Regina	Saskatoon	Vancouver	Victoria	Winnipeg	Total
Aboriginal NGO	8 (19%)	6 (19%)	3 (15%)	3 (19%)	6 (15%)	2 (11%)	8 (31%)	36 (19%)
Band council	0	0	0	1 (6%)	0	0	1 (4%)	2 (1%)
Non-Aboriginal NGO	32 (74%)	23 (74%)	13 (65%)	11 (69%)	30 (77%)	16 (84%)	15 (58%)	140 (72%)
Federal government	2 (5%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 (1%)
Provincial government	0	1 (3%)	3 (15%)	1 (6%)	3 (8%)	1 (5%)	2 (8%)	11 (6%)
Municipal government	1 (2%)	1 (3%)	1 (5%)	0	0	0	0	3 (2%)
Total	43 (100%)	31 (100%)	20 (100%)	16 (100%)	39 (100%)	19 (100%)	26 (100%)	194 (100%)

TABLE 4: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ABORIGINAL SPECIFIC SERVICES AND GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE BY CITY

	Calgary	Edmonton	Regina	Saskatoon	Vancouver	Victoria	Winnipeg	Total
Aboriginal NGO	8 (89%)	5 (72%)	3 (75%)	4 (100%)	0	0	7 (70%)	27 (64%)
Non-Aboriginal NGO	0	2 (29%)	0	0	7 (88%)	0	0	9 (21%)
Federal, provincial or municipal government	1 (11%)	0	1 (25%)	0	1 (12%)	0	1 (10%)	4 (10%)
Aboriginal government	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 (20%)	2 (5%)
Total	9 (100%)	7 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	8 (100%)	0	10 (100%)	42 ¹ (100%)

Chi Square = 163.859; df = 3; p = 0.000; ¹2 missing cases.

could innocently alienate a key stakeholder in their research project.

Defining representation in terms of who can provide oversight of research affecting Aboriginal peoples in an urban area can also be difficult because, as we learned in all three projects, the urban Aboriginal population often comes from different provinces or territories and different tribes. All three of our projects were done in partnership with the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary and we are grateful that staff were able to participate and board members volunteered. There are numerous Friendship Centers, which operate under a national body and serve all self-identified Aboriginal peoples. Friendship Centers maintain provincial organizations as well as entities in cities and towns in each province and territory. The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) provides a network across Canada and serves an important role which logically includes research:

The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) is a network of 119 Friendship Centres from coast-to-coast-to-coast. The NAFC was established in 1972 to represent, nationally, the growing number of Friendship Centres emerging across Canada. Friendship Centres are the primary providers of culturally-enhanced programs and services to urban Aboriginal residents. (NAFC, 2013a)

Our mission is to improve the quality of life for Aboriginal peoples in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to, and participation in, Canadian Society; and which respect and strengthen the increasing emphasis on Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness. (NAFC, 2013b)

Despite the significance of Friendship Centers, they vary in number and types of programs offered, size of staff, and reputation among the Aboriginal peoples in a given city. Like other NGOs they compete for project funding and a great deal of time is spent on grant writing as well as the advocacy required. With the scope of the problem of Aboriginal homelessness, coupled with the other problems with which many urban Aboriginal peoples are coping, Aboriginal organizations are stretched in the provision of service before being asked to take time and resources to participate in research, let alone to be accountable to their

clients and populations served for the research. With any Aboriginal NGO the researcher may therefore need to build in compensation for this partner organization.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE TRI-COUNCIL POLICY AND FIRST NATIONS PRINCIPLES OF OCAP GUIDELINE

The current Canadian standard for the ethical conduct of research involving Aboriginal peoples is the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS), Chapter 9, Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2010). The TCPS stresses the importance of community and respect for community customs, and collaboration and engagement between researchers and participants. In addition to the TCPS, First Nations communities in Alberta and other parts of Canada are implementing policies concerning OCAP (FNIGC, 2012). The principles of OCAP specify that First Nations control data collection processes in their communities, own the information, protect it, and control how their information is used.

In an urban setting in Western Canada Aboriginal peoples may come from many different First Nations that have lands or reserves where they live, a chief and a band council. If one were to follow OCAP to the letter, each band might have to be contacted and that may not be feasible because resources do not exist for making the contacts and responding to the questions of the recipients. The alternative is to establish what First Nation each research participant is from and alerting only those; however, this risks breaching confidentiality. To give an idea of the complexity of governance issues the researcher may encounter we describe some structures addressing First Nations and Métis Aboriginal peoples. In Manitoba there are seven Treaties with First Nations (1–6 and 10) and five First Nations that did not sign any Treaty. There are 63 bands of First Nations people (AANDC, 2013a). The Manitoba Métis Federation operates provincially, with seven regional offices (Manitoba Metis Federation, 2013). In Saskatchewan, 70 First Nations are included in Treaties 2, 4–6, 8 and 10, overlapping with Manitoba and Alberta. Across Saskatchewan, there are nine tribal councils

that support the work of the First Nations within the province. An additional six organizations with multi-tribal affiliation also operate within the province (AANDC, 2013b). For instance, the Saskatoon Tribal Council provides many services within the city of Saskatoon (Saskatoon Tribal Council, 2013). The Métis Nation in Saskatchewan operates a central organization, with 12 regional bodies, which each have several satellite offices (Métis Nation Saskatchewan, 2013). In Alberta, there are 47 First Nations recognized by federal and provincial governments. There are four Treaties covering the Alberta landmass (Treaties 4, 6–8), but generally Treaties 6, 7 and 8 are the ones that are germane to Aboriginal peoples of Alberta. The Assembly of Treaty Chiefs is a provincial body providing ‘mutual support’. Treaty 7 Management Corporation (T7MC) represents the seven nations that signed and are administered according to Treaty 7 (T7MC, 2013), whereas, Treaties 6 and 8 have Tribal Councils (see *The Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations*, 2013). There are eight Métis settlements under a single General Council that operates offices across Alberta through six regional associations (Métis Nation of Alberta, 2013). The British Columbia (BC) government lists nearly 275 First Nation and Band contacts (BCMARR, 2013a). In BC there are 24 treaty offices, 41 Tribal Councils, 3 Treaty First Nation Governments, 37 Métis associations and societies, and 19 umbrella organizations (BCMARR, 2013b). There are five Treaties and three agreements in principle; these are considered modern Treaties and were signed in the last 20 years (BC Treaty Commission, 2013).

As mentioned in the previous section, Aboriginal Friendship Centres can play an important role as a tribal neutral organization in an urban setting, but they may be limited by resources. At the University of Calgary we are fortunate to have representation of the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC, 2012), Alberta Region, on the CHREB; however, this is the first instance of such a relationship we are aware of in Canada (B. Healey, personal communication, December 2012). Most REB, therefore, may operate with limited input from Aboriginals themselves on proposals that impact Aboriginal peoples.

DISCUSSION

The disproportionate representation of Aboriginal peoples among urban homeless populations is rooted in a long history of colonialism, a history that has caused large inequities between Aboriginal peoples and other citizens, not only in Canada, but in Australia and the United States. Parsell (2011), for instance, discusses how Australia’s policy of moving urban homeless Indigenous people back to the country, ostensibly ‘home’, ignores their issues of identity and loss, and exacerbates their lack of access to needed services, while Zufferey and Kerr (2004) found the same experience reported in our studies of being uprooted by child welfare and the resulting loss of identity in Indigenous people experiencing homelessness in Adelaide, Australia. The overrepresentation of American Indians among the urban homeless populations of the United States and its roots in a history of displacement and marginalization are equally clear (Whitbeck, Crawford, & Hartshorn, 2012). Paradoxically, Aboriginal peoples have not only survived but many demonstrate community resilience, independence and capacity-building. As we investigate the impacts of these inequities we can learn a great deal about ending homelessness generally but we maintain that the most effective lessons will be learned with genuine participation of Indigenous people (Boffa, King, McMullin, & Long, 2011) in a critical post-colonialist epistemology (Josewski, 2013; Smylie et al., 2009). We are indebted to the reviewer of this paper who also noted that working across state boundaries we can also learn from each others mistakes and successes in addressing Aboriginal homelessness.

The need for solutions to urban Aboriginal homelessness and for researchers willing to seek them will not lessen in the next decade in Canada. An Environics Institute (2010) report noted that more than half of Aboriginal peoples in Canada now live in urban areas studied and that urbanization of Aboriginal peoples is likely to continue. Much of past research on Aboriginal peoples has focused on First Nation experiences, that is, peoples living on land (reserves) designated to them by the Canadian government. As the Environics report stated:

The nature of the urban Aboriginal community varies from city to city. Aboriginal communities in urban areas are not simply transplanted non-urban communities. The importance to urban Aboriginal peoples of particular community ties (e.g., family, neighbours, other Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal services and organizations, etc.) differs somewhat across cities, suggesting their sense of identity and community is shaped by features of the particular city around them. (Environics, 2010, p. 8).

Thus the need for city specific research and attention to the context for Aboriginal peoples is essential and we can benefit from sharing our methodological solutions as well as research results in an effort to address the inequity of homelessness.

We have noted a number of methodological challenges that may be faced by researchers and their partners who are trying to reduce the rate of homelessness in urban centers, especially the rates among Aboriginal peoples. We hope that these will alert other researchers to issues to be discussed and considered but we want to emphasize that we have not been discouraged by these challenges and have found the efforts required to address them include engaging with community partners. In seeking solutions for the public health problem of homelessness we have found the required extra effort of community-based research well worth the effort in terms of knowledge gain and wisdom enhancement for both academic and community partners. We are undertaking a project to define a culturally safe program model within a non-Aboriginal organization. The methodological literature supports the importance of university and non-university researchers partnering in CBR with the people delivering services, setting policies, and with expertise in Aboriginal ways of knowing (Absolon, 2010; Kovach, 2009; Martin, 2008). This may be especially important when working with people who are marginalized by society, such as the homeless population, and the Aboriginal homeless in particular (Liamputtong, 2010). To conduct research in a participatory way may take more time for relationship maintenance than in other academic projects, so grant writers and funders are encouraged to add this to time tables and budgets.

CONCLUSION

The challenges raised in this paper were grouped under five headings concerning intersecting aspects of methodology from sampling to dissemination and ethics. The number of challenges may seem daunting, and they will be at times, but we urge researchers not to be discouraged in the face of the urgent need to find new solutions to a problem where inequities clearly exist. If one seeks to create equity, to understand the 'social determinants of equity' (Jones, Jones, Perry, & Barclay, 2009, p. 2) then undertaking CBR appears to be the key solution to these methodological challenges at this time. Leaving the research to members of the Aboriginal communities would simply create other inequities. Fortunately, there are increasingly courses and networks to facilitate the practice of CBR among academics (e.g., Community–Campus Partnerships for Health, 2013), as well as efforts to create academic environments where the time to create good working relationships is valued (Institute for Community Engaged Scholarship, 2013).

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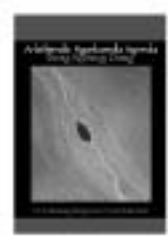
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