

Perspectives on Health and Housing in the Canadian North: Comparing Experiences of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous People

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Background

- The United Nations recognizes that shelter is a basic human need and that adequate housing should be acknowledged as a human right by all countries.
- As a wealthy country, Canada is well positioned to take steps toward legal recognition of the right to housing.
- In November 2017, the federal government released a policy document outlining a new National Housing Strategy.
 - Yet concerns have been raised that it will deliver only modest improvements rather than the ambitious statements of claim made in the policy.

Background (2)

- Over 600 thousand homes were built for low income Canadians from the 1940s to the 1970s. Severe funding cuts to national housing programs began in the 1980s and continued into the 1990s.
- The interconnectedness of housing challenges and homelessness contributes to high rates of Indigenous homelessness.
- Similar to the situation in First Nation communities, the housing challenges for urban Indigenous people have been documented.
- Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services reported that Indigenous people account for an estimated 29 percent of people living with homelessness or the risk of homelessness in Canada.

Housing and health

- Within diverse populations and settings, precariously housed individuals experience multiple health vulnerabilities.
- Physical disrepair in housing has been linked to varied health issues including asthma, respiratory infections, injuries and mental health challenges.
- Children have been found to be more negatively affected with long-term impacts on their development.

Hidden homelessness

- Hidden homelessness takes many forms in northern and rural communities, examples:
 - Couch surfing and other time-limited shelter within informal familial or social networks;
 - Substandard housing and overcrowding;
 - Living in tents;
 - Bush camps or RVs;
 - Motels, hotels, or other temporary accommodation;
 - Institutional settings;
 - Exchanging sex or other services for temporary accommodation.

Housing for Indigenous people

- Most housing on First Nations is in need of repairs: 37 percent need major repairs and another 34 percent require minor repairs.
- Dispute over responsibility for housing is connected to the housing crisis:
 - Many First Nations assert that housing is a treaty right linked to original occupancy of the land and the special relationship with the federal government.
 - But the federal government views housing as an issue for social policy.
 - The Assembly of First Nations has estimated that 85,000 new units must be built to meet the housing needs of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Approach to photovoice:

- Three communities participated in the project :
- Two northern Cree First Nation (FN) communities, one a remote James Bay coastal community and the other a rural, northern inland community.
- The third, Cochrane, is a prosperous resource-based town located approximately one hour away from a northern Ontario city (Timmins).

Themes in photos and narratives

	Cochrane	Cree FNs
▪ Couch surfing or sleeping outdoors	✓	✓
▪ Unsanitary conditions: toilet, bath, mould, infestations	✓	✓
▪ Lack of security: doors, windows, wiring, unsafe drinking water	✓	✓
▪ Darkness, broken windows: dark, dingy, poor lighting, cold	✓	✓
▪ Overcrowding: shared kitchen, bath, sleeping and living space	✓	✓
▪ Loss of housing: eviction, fire, deterioration	✓	✓
▪ Poor construction/maintenance: foundation, roofing	✓	✓
▪ Health impacts: physical, mental, social, food insecurity	✓	✓

Couch surfing



Moisture and mould



Insecurity



Outside lock



Inside lock

Security



Water contamination or no running water



Broken windows



Broken windows

Overcrowding



Water damage



Leaky ceiling



Roof and foundation



Food insecurity



Implications

- The results show that the same major themes were discussed by participants in all three communities.
- However, three subthemes were identified only by people in First Nation communities:
 - unsafe drinking water, broken windows and grossly substandard/dangerous electrical wiring.
- A 2015 Senate report observed that “there is a serious housing situation in many First Nations communities” due to housing shortages, poor quality housing and the need for major repairs.
- Through the act of taking a photograph, participants communicated their everyday realities.
- Many were hopeful that greater familiarity among the Canadian public with these issues will lead to stronger pressure on those in power to bring about meaningful changes.
- “So it’s pretty sad, eh? In a country this rich, you know, this prosperous, to have people really living like that.” (Wolfe, Sudbury, Indigenous man, age 45)

Implications (2)

- The findings show the need to recognize the health effects of housing hardship amongst people who have a roof over their heads.
- The emphasis placed on forms of absolute, chronic and episodic homelessness may distract from the extensive problems linked to hidden homelessness.
- Yet hidden homelessness often brings with it the same deleterious health outcomes as absolute homelessness.
- Substandard housing—an important social determinant of health—needs to be more widely understood and acted upon.
- Poverty is linked to inadequate, substandard and poor housing—it impacts on health cumulatively over the life-course and significantly contributes to morbidity and mortality .

Implications for reconciliation

- Must resolve disputes between the Government of Canada and Indigenous groups—examples:
 - Equal funding for housing and other services;
 - Indigenous/Aboriginal trust funds and the placement of Indigenous revenues into the Consolidated Revenue Fund;
 - Respect UNDRIP and TRC Calls to Action.

Thank you, miigwetch, merci.

Questions or comments?

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