Chapter 6.3

Hidden Homelessness among Aboriginal Peoples in Prairie Cities

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This research examined hidden homelessness among Aboriginal persons in prairie cities. In particular, we gathered data in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Regina on the shelter circumstances of persons precariously housed in tenuous situations, including those who lived temporarily with friends or family or those who resided in short-term accommodations such as shelters, rooming houses or hotels.

The study was governed by a regional Steering Committee that helped establish the context and purpose of the data collection methods. It was also recognized that researchers needed to be mindful of the richness of Aboriginal culture and diversity in Prairie cities. A respected Elder was invited to provide support. The Steering Committee also suggested that the study commence by undertaking informal discussions with hidden homeless persons so as to better understand the core issues facing persons presently finding themselves in housing distress. These sessions helped researchers understand and set the course for the formal survey process. Where possible, community-based researchers were used to assist in the gathering of knowledge from participants and sitting

on the Steering Committee and in establishing relationships within each of the study cities.

Following the more structured surveys that were undertaken, a traditional Talking Circle was held in Winnipeg. Led by a respected Elder, this session was used to connect participants together and to respect Indigenous methodological approaches.

A second set of interviews were then held with service providers in each of the three cities to better understand their perspectives in dealing with housing distress.

The results of the study continue to reinforce the need for additional housing and supports to those currently struggling to find adequate and affordable shelter. Perhaps a key finding was also the nearly 20 percent of participants who indicated they had a seasonal connection to their home communities. This group represented what the Australian literature refers to as "Spiritual Homeless." It is our contention that this group remains unique among those in various levels of housing distress.

However, given that just under 45 percent of the participants indicated they moved more than three times in the last six months is also an indication of the high level of residential instability among participants.

For their part, service providers recognize the enormity of the situation and do their best to cope with a system bursting at the seams with respect to being able to deal with the crushing need to provide shelter and supports to a range of persons who move for a variety of reasons. With respect to mobility, it remained clear that the movement of people is due to a range of factors that this study can only begin to understand.

Perhaps it is critical to reiterate that the "homeless" are by far a heterogeneous group and they remain equally complex and diverse, ranging from the absolute and visible homeless to the more invisible "hidden homeless." But these are merely broad descriptors that do not capture the uniqueness of the urban Aboriginal communities in Winnipeg, Regina and Saskatoon, and in particular, those in housing distress.

The simple but powerful words of one participant sum up much of the research in saying, "home is where the heart is… and right now that is nowhere."

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> Social support helps motivate me to work, to pick myself up when people put me down, to keep going on with life, even when I don't want to anymore.

This section evaluates the results of the survey in relation to the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample, to their housing circumstances and sources of social support. The discussion includes a consideration of participants' experiences of discrimination, their sources of social support, their participation in organizations, and their connection to the reserve. Given the lack of understanding regarding the issue of hidden homelessness, the intent of this section is to describe the general housing circumstances and characteristics of First Nations peoples in housing distress so as to better understand the factors that have contributed to their present shelter situation.

Residential instability

Just over 40 percent of individuals in the sample had lived in more than three locations in the six-month period prior to the survey. This high degree of movement further substantiates the internal residential churn among Aboriginal persons that was introduced in the literature review.

Almost one-half (47.2 percent) of the respondents expressed some level of apprehension about remaining in their respective city on a permanent basis. The residential instability experienced by participants in this study raises significant concerns with respect to both overall affordability and availability of housing in Canadian Prairie cities. As homelessness is characterized by high mobility, an important element to evaluate is the multiplicity of temporary accommodations in which individuals reside for varying periods of time (Springer, 2000). Over half (55.8 percent) of sample members were in relatively stable residential situations as they reported staying in only one or two temporary residences during the period. In contrast, the remainder of the sample members was considerably more mobile, as they reported residence in three or more accommodations. The high frequency of movement suggests that this sub-sample experienced considerably more residential instability. Thus, the following overview compares sample members experienc-

ing relative residential stability (one or two temporary accommodations) and those subjected to greater instability (three or more temporary accommodations).

Demographic and Economic Characteristics

The highest proportion of our sample was male (55.8 percent) and under the age of 30 years old (47.5 percent). In relation to residential stability, a higher proportion of males and older sample members reported living temporarily in only one or two accommodations in the six months prior to the survey.

In relation to Aboriginal identity, almost three-quarters of the sample (71.7 percent) reported being part of the First Nations of Canada, while 28.3 percent reported Métis ancestry. While one-half of First Nations respondents indicated residence in three or more temporary accommodations during the previous six months, a greater proportion of Métis respondents reported relative residential stability.

The overwhelming majority (68.6 percent) of those experiencing hidden homelessness were unemployed, while 17.7 percent were employed in some capacity and 13.7 percent were students. Approximately three quarters of those who were unemployed indicated that they had received some form of social assistance. Furthermore, in order to better understand the circumstances of these individuals, it is important to consider other strategies they utilized to earn money. For example, over 20 percent of the sample indicated that they were involved in activities in the informal sector.6 "I clean up every day and watch the children while the mom goes out all night. I also get food requisitions and I'm like the main supplier for food. I would also sell myself for sexual favours just to get money for food, smokes and whatever else we needed." (28-old female respondent). Generally speaking, the informal sector includes such activities as the drug trade, etc.

One-quarter (24.8 percent) of the sample reported an education level below grade 9, while over one-half (57.1 percent) of the respondents had obtained some level of high school education, although they had not obtained a high school certificate. As for income, three-quarters of the sample received less than $10,000 annually. Specifically, 55.2 percent of

the sample reported an income of less than $10,000 annually and 19.8 percent reported no income at all.

These indicators of socio-economic well-being emphasize the marginalization of Aboriginal persons experiencing housing distress. Nonetheless, 63.4 percent of the sample indicated that they were optimistic that their economic future would at least get slightly better. It is interesting to note that respondents who reported being employed and had little or no income but were optimistic about their economic future were more likely to have resided in three or more temporary accommodations in the past six months. Conversely, greater residential stability was experienced by those respondents who were unemployed.

Housing circumstances

A key piece of the housing analysis of the study probed the use of emergency shelters or places where people went when there were no other options available. Thirty percent of the sample indicated that they had used an emergency shelter in the last year. Respondents who experienced greater residential instability were more likely to use shelters. Similarly, those who had resided in three or more accommodations in the past six months reported using shelters more frequently than individuals who were in more stable housing circumstances. The overwhelming majority of the sample indicated that they were treated fairly and with respect by both agency staff (56.9 percent) and other individuals staying at the shelter (61.5 percent) when accessing services. The comments of one person summed up the experience by stating "yes, we were in the same boat and were there for each other."

The use of emergency shelters by 30 percent of the sample points to the ongoing need to provide supportive shelter services, especially in cold climate cities. In fact, one respondent noted that there was a need for both additional units and a general public awareness of existing resources and stated that government should "make more places into homeless shelters and make the public know more about shelters." Other respondents were positive about the treatment they received with one persons stating that staff were "kind, gentle, caring people who help people in time of trouble."

The Aboriginal community is complex, characterized by a high degree of differentiation among various groups (e.g., First Nations, Métis and Inuit) and geographic location (e.g., rural, northern, remote and on and off reserve). To explore the complexity of connections to home communities, respondents were asked whether they had ever lived on reserve. We found that 62.5 percent of the sample had lived on reserve, with a slightly higher proportion of those respondents in greater residential instability having lived on reserve previously.

Reasons given most often for leaving the reserve included the desire to access educational and employment opportunities, as well as better housing.

We asked whether respondents lived in their home community on a seasonal basis. The overwhelming majority (81.7 percent) of the sample replied that they did not move seasonally. Nevertheless, 18.2 percent of respondents indicated that they indeed had a connection to their home community.

Furthermore, although similar proportions of both the residentially stable and unstable sub-groups did live in the city seasonally, those respondents who reported residing in three or more temporary accommodations in the past six months visited their reserve community with greater frequency. It is important to recognize that those individuals who move on a seasonal basis undoubtedly represent a key segment of the population that will move periodically between urban and home community.

When asked about the seasonal aspect of living in the city and home community, those who offered comments noted that friends and family in the home community contributed to their decision to move between places.

With respect to the current housing situation, 69.3 percent of the sample indicated that they presently lived in an apartment, row or single detached home. The remainder of the sample was housed in rooming houses, single room occupancy hotels or other transitional housing units. Those respondents who reported a greater number of temporary residences were more likely to be housed in accommodations consisting of a single room.

Data related to length of time in a temporary accommodation is an indicator of the degree of residential instability. Almost all respondents indicated that they had resided at the current address for less than one year. Furthermore, almost three-quarters (73.8 percent) of the sample had lived at the current location for less than six months. Those residing in fewer temporary accommodations were more likely to report a longer average length of time at each residence, as well as a longer period of time at the current temporary residence.

In contrast, those respondents experiencing greater residential instability reported shorter periods of residency in each temporary accommodation.

Almost 80 percent of the sample had lived in the city for over a year at the time of the survey. In addition, those respondents reporting fewer temporary accommodations also reported longer residency in the city. And while well over half of the sub-sample of those in relative stable residential accommodations indicated that they planned to remain in the city permanently, more respondents experiencing greater residential instability were unsure of their future plans.

In relation to residential quality, a series of questions was posed to examine the general condition of the present shelter, perceptions of crowding and overall satisfaction with the shelter.

With respect to the general condition of the current residence, 40.5 percent of the sample indicated that their shelter required some repairs, while 23 percent of respondents felt their current shelter was in poor condition and needed significant attention to improve the unit.

In relation to perceptions of crowding, almost half (47.9 percent) of the sample did not consider their current residence to be crowded. In contrast, 32.5 percent of respondents were in somewhat crowded conditions, while 19.7 percent indicated that they were living in very crowded conditions. When we asked about the overall satisfaction of respondents in their current shelter, only a small proportion (10.9 percent) of the sample was very satisfied with current accommodations.

The high proportion of respondents who were only somewhat satisfied or were unsatisfied with their shelter emphasizes the poor conditions in which Aboriginal persons experiencing housing distress must endure. It is also notable that a slightly higher proportion of those res-

pondents who had changed residences at least three times in the past six months were in very crowded conditions and were unsatisfied with their shelter.

From the brief review above, it becomes clear that there is some level of uncertainty about shelter and that satisfaction and condition varied among participants. To examine these issues in more detail a series of questions were posed to examine the level of use of subsidy programs among participants. These questions included asking whether persons had accessed subsidized housing, whether they were on a waiting list and whether they were aware of existing programs. A second and related set of questions then asked whether there were any problems when seeking subsidized housing with respect to their treatment and general experiences.

Overall, the use of subsidized housing was low among participants with only 22.7 percent indicating that they had previously accessed supportive housing. (When examining the income distribution of the sample, it was apparent that while few "accessed" subsidized housing, many would benefit because of their low income levels.) Furthermore, only 18 percent of the sample was currently on a wait list, while just over 15 percent stated that they had been denied subsidized housing when applying in the past. With respect to those who had applied but were placed on a wait list, over one third (35.7 percent) indicated that they had been waiting for more than a year.

When asked to explain their experience in applying and trying to secure subsidized housing, comments ranged from persons feeling that they were mistreated to those who were completely satisfied with the experience. One person stated they were unsure of the process, writing "I don't know how to go about it, and I just never hear back from the housing company," while another said, "Winnipeg regional housing takes forever to answer back…six month to have the first interview." Another person felt that being single posed a barrier to accessing subsidized housing, "I have never applied because they give priority to people with children and families…never applied too worried about not getting in and getting my hopes up."

Interestingly, many suggested that subsidized housing was only given to persons who were employed or had families and children under

their care. When asked about the barriers they experienced, most commented on not having proper references or the necessary deposits to secure a place. Others also raised concerns about discrimination and mistreatment by landlords who profile perspective tenants.

In an effort to probe the living situations of respondents in more detail, we asked a series of questions examined the temporary nature of each person's housing situation. At present, 75 percent of the sample indicated that they were currently living temporarily with friends and or family. Most important, was that 81.5 percent of persons staying in a temporary accommodation with either friends or family indicated that they contributed to the household in a variety of ways and that if they were to leave this accommodation, 35 percent felt this would pose a hardship for the household. When asked how persons contributed to the household, many included both financial and non financial elements such as doing chores, providing childcare and basically helping out around the home. Others noted that they contributed money on a frequent (monthly) or infrequent basis (when they had the ability).

From this brief overview, it is clear that the housing circumstances of those presently considered part of the hidden homeless population poses a challenge. On the one hand, many who are currently living with friends or family contribute to that household through a variety of means, with many feeling that their departure would put undue stress should they leave.

However, it also became clear that the living arrangements are tenuous, with many moving quite frequently over a short period of time. Ultimately, supportive housing is needed and must recognize the hardship of providing deposits and potential reference checks, especially for those just moving into an urban centre. With a high number on waiting listings, there is a need to continue to provide not only access to units and housing but also to get the necessary information out to persons moving into urban centres about the programs and supports currently available to assist (both on a short term emergency basis and a long term permanent solution).

Support and Hidden Homelessness

We evaluated support with respect to respondents' experiences of discrimination, social support, participation with organizations and support from the reserve.

First, the survey included a question regarding the respondents' experiences with discrimination and unfair treatment. It is important to note that while this question was not central to the study, the participants expressed that various forms of unfair treatment were pervasive across all sectors.

Well over half of the participants (60 percent) articulated the view that acts of racism and discrimination affected their daily existence in the urban setting.

Similar proportions of males (61 percent) and females (59 percent) replied that they experienced some form of discrimination and unfair treatment. It is notable that compared to those in relative residential stability, a higher proportion of respondents who moved frequently experienced discrimination.

Examples were provided of the systematic or institutional discrimination experienced by Aboriginal persons in their encounters with housing organizations, government agencies, and potential employers. One male stated that he preferred Aboriginal run housing organizations because he "would not feel so discriminated against." In terms of possible employment opportunities one person claimed that "I feel discrimination by not getting jobs because of being Aboriginal" while another person felt that their appearance was a factor, " Yes, there's a lot of discrimination in this city, most won't hire you because of your appearance."

However, not all comments were related to racial discrimination as some participants felt discriminated against by housing organizations because they received social assistance, yet others felt employers did not treat them fairly due to a lack of a high school certificate or a "poor work history." For the purpose of this study, social support was defined to include emotional guidance and encouragement, mentoring and networking (being told about a job opportunity etc.) and consisted of relationships with friends, relatives, neighbours, professionals, as well as community organizations. Social support could mean providing child-

care or support for an elder in the home. When asked what social support meant, the comments of survey respondents ranged from "co-dependency" to "accessibility to resources within the community whether it be friends, family or food banks." Over three-quarters (77 percent) of the sample had some form of social support. It is interesting that while 75.6 percent of the sample indicated that they had the support of family, only 66.1 percent of respondents had the support of friends. It is also significant that a lower proportion of respondents who moved three or more times in the six months prior to the survey had some form of social support.

Moreover, while similar proportions of the residentially stable and unstable had the support of family, a greater proportion of those moving more frequently had the support of friends.

> I'd like to see more Aboriginal organizations and/or persons providing advocacy services on behalf of other Aboriginals, especially for single moms like myself. I'd like to have more support from a native worker to help me adjust to the city and the areas that I find myself in, someone to do home visits, and possibly a small group of women like myself, I can hang around with, who have the same concerns and feelings like myself. (24 year old female respondent).

Many participants spoke of having social support from family through offering a temporary place to stay or simply congratulating them on successes and informing them of different opportunities that may interest them or help them to further succeed in their endeavors. One person expressed a lack of support due to the size of his family, "no family, except one brother, and he has a family, I am a grown man and pride gets in the way." He further stated that, "men have pride, don't want to take help when they know they need it, agencies should be discreet and compensate for this." Despite this viewpoint, this individual has social support through friends and calls them, "if I need a place to stay." The overwhelming majority (81.5 percent) of those persons staying in a temporary accommodation with either friends or family indicated that they contributed to the household in a variety of ways. If they were to leave this accommodation, 35 percent felt this would pose a hardship for the household. When asked how persons contributed to the household, many included both financial and non financial elements such as

doing chores, providing childcare and basically helping out around the home. Others noted that they contributed money on a frequent (monthly) or infrequent basis (when they had the ability).

In addition to the availability of social supports, we considered the involvement of survey respondents in community organizations, as this may also reflect a form of support for individuals experiencing hidden homelessness. Over half (55.1 percent) of the sample did participate in organizations. Those respondents experiencing relative residential stability were more likely to be involved in two or more organizations. In contrast, a greater proportion of the sub-sample that moved more frequently were involved in only one organization and participated in the activities of the organization less often.

In relation to the experience of support for Aboriginal persons in housing distress, it is also important to consider whether support was received from the reserve or home community. Only 10 percent of the sample received financial support from their home community. Almost 90 percent of the sample did not receive financial support with little difference between the residentially stable and unstable groups. In addition to financial support, respondents were asked whether they were involved with their band or community.

Approximately 20 percent of the sample did indicate that they were involved with their home community with a slightly higher proportion of involvement reported by those in more unstable residential situations.

The purpose of this section was to examine the support system for those who experience the hidden homeless condition. Often people with no fixed address or living in unstable situations have lost contact with family, friends and have little or no support networks. The challenges that relate to their uncertain circumstances of day-to-day life includes the exclusion of established community networks. Unfamiliarity with existing networks and agencies can result in frustration, inability to find the right supports and isolation from the rest of the community.

Many people do not want to be part of a "culture of dependency" and want to find ways to contribute and engage in their communities. Personal connections with friends and family can be critical when seeking some basic needs such as food and clothing while reaching stability in housing, seeking employment and education. It was revealed during

this study that a majority of the participants have social supports, whether it is from service providers, home communities or family and friends.

Service Providers

The two most important issues facing Aboriginal persons in finding adequate shelter were the lack of financial resources and availability of shelter in general.

Data were collected by interviewing 60 key personnel involved in the provision of services in Winnipeg, Regina and Saskatoon. The selection of service providers interviewed ranged from a diverse set of organizations in each of the three prairie cities. Examples of organizations that generously offered their time for this research included, but was not limited to, housing, education, health and employment services.

Housing organizations ranged from shelters, transitional housing, supportive housing, affordable rental housing agencies and safe houses. There were many community and "grassroots" organizations such as drop-in, crisis, learning, sport, family and support, community centres and schools that offered their knowledge and experiences. Government agencies were also very supportive and included Police Services, Provincial Housing Authorities and Municipal Governments. Finally, the non-profit sector such as the Manitoba Assembly of Chiefs, the Indian and Métis Friendship Centres and Tribal offices in each of the three prairie cities were instrumental in providing a balanced insight into the challenges and opportunities in providing services to those part of the hidden homelessness population.

Not all participating agencies provided programs and services solely to the Aboriginal community; in fact more than half held a mandate that covered their community as a whole. The individuals that gave their time was also diverse in that some held positions of leadership while others held the equally important position of frontline worker. During interviews a portion of the agencies preferred to have more than one staff member participate which provided a rich and thorough insight into how their organization delivers services to the community.

While they were busy fulfilling their mandates, they participated wholeheartedly in the interview process. This willingness to participate

is thought to be partly a result of extensive relationship-building by the researchers throughout the study and the dedication of these agencies have to assisting the community they serve. For example, one drop-in centre worker in Saskatoon told us, "In 1995 we had 6,000 visits per year, the past year we exceeded 20,000 visits per year." Participants told researchers that the two most important issues facing Aboriginal persons in finding adequate shelter were the lack of financial resources and availability of shelter in general.

Both service providers and persons seeking adequate housing maintained that by not being able to supply a damage deposit or supply sufficient references were a significant barrier in accessing housing. A non-profit housing manager in Winnipeg maintained, "You need a co-signer for renting a place; it is ridiculous, [it's] not fair to have guarantee, [it's] too hard for some." The lack of finances often pushes people into residing in accommodations located in neighbourhoods that are considered "unsafe" by some. One service provider in Winnipeg reported, "The only place a resident can find, on the amount allocated by social assistance, is to reside in an area that is economically disadvantaged. In the long run, this causes problems for some families due to community issues such as gangs, prostitution, bad role models for children, etc." In Regina a participant stated, "Adequate shelter isn't available, that is the issue. Some of the higher ups should be given a welfare cheque and see what type of living situation they can rent with the money." Lack of employment and education and were other reasons commonly cited.

Affordable housing, lack of urban knowledge and accessing support services were the most commonly cited reasons for the experiences for those who are new to the urban setting. A staff member, who works in a transitional housing organization in Saskatoon reported, "People lack knowledge of who they are, where they are, and what they can do. Welfare has programs but do not tell the people, clearly what they are, if you don't ask, you don't get it." Another key issue were language barriers, especially for migrants from northern communities "Not knowing the system, the language etc. it does not take much for a person to believe that they can't get help."

Aboriginal Philosophy or Approach to Service Delivery

The service providers were asked if their organization has a specific Aboriginal philosophy or approach.

A majority of these agencies reported that they have developed and delivered culturally appropriate approaches to service delivery over the number of years they have been in operation. For example, one housing organization that serves the Aboriginal community in Winnipeg, delivers their services in a holistic manner by being adaptable to the changing requirements of their clients. This organization works with tenants, some of whom may experience personal challenges that lead to difficulties in paying their monthly rent.

Rather than being threatened with eviction, they are "listened and cared for, understanding that budgets are limited." Other organizations reported that they offered sensitivity training for their staff or had dedicated staff members, such as Elders who were trained to be supportive and sensitive to the healing of Aboriginal peoples.

Service providers were asked if they could identify any gaps in the current system or what other programs were needed that would be of benefit to persons accessing their programs. One frontline worker at an emergency shelter in Winnipeg stated, "I am a gap worker, I fill the gaps." Agencies share the common concerns in long-term funding arrangements. Many stated the procedures for obtaining funding for various grants and projects was too time consuming and interfered with fulfilling their organization's mandate. In Winnipeg, a provider of adult education stated, "We are funded short term for a long term problem." The following list highlights suggestions that service providers perceived as beneficial to the current system in relation to access.

- More funding for social service workers to conduct home visits;
- Education programs related to house maintenance;
- Increased focus on youth programs;
- After care support for people after treatment programs (substance use);
- Quicker response time in arranging appointments with Social Services;
- More sport programs for youth;

- Increase in shelters;
- Increase in shelters for victims of domestic abuse;
- Increase in drop-in shelters for over-night accommodations;
- Central source of information and referrals;
- Reduction in government bureaucracy;
- Increase in funding for childcare;
- Increase in advocacy in general;
- Increase in communication.

In terms of outreach and advertising their services, 90 percent of the participants reported they did not publicize outside the city limits. In particular, non-profit housing organizations expressed that they saw no value in creating awareness of their organization, regardless of geographical location, due to their extremely long and lengthy waiting lists of tenant applicants.

Forms of service delivery promotion were primarily through partnerships with other organizations, attending conferences and serving on committees where a diverse range of agencies participated. Web sites, pamphlets and various forms of literature (posters, reports, newsletters, etc.) were also cited as methods of creating awareness of their services offered.

Most importantly, a majority of organizations acknowledged that their clients primarily learn about their services through "word of mouth." One agency in Saskatoon reported that their clients became aware of their services through multiple ways, "The majority of our clients come to us through word of mouth, client to client, agency worker to agency worker to client. We aim to keep agencies informed." Organizations continuously adapt to meet the needs of the ever-changing community that they serve. For example, one Winnipeg organization that primarily serves the Aboriginal population has, over the past few years, added parenting, literacy, solvent abuse prevention and nutrition components to their programs due to reports concerning observations the population that they serve. Others have rightfully recognized the impacts of the residential school syndrome and the "sixties scoop" and have adapted programming sensitive to those specific needs required to contribute to the healing process.

When asked if they knew of any trends or best practices relating to the provision of services, surprisingly many did not. This may be reflective of the pressures related to the challenging nature of their work within the public realm. One person spoke highly of the recent initiatives and funding from NHI and believes that this program has greatly assisted persons on the verge of homelessness. Another person simply stated that a differing viewpoint is needed regarding the hidden homeless population, "Don't blame the poor, the victims. Deal with solutions versus who is to blame. Poverty is the key, then the rest follows."

What is "home"?

At the broadest level, this research has confirmed that hidden homelessness among Aboriginal persons in Prairie cities remains an area of concern. This concern stems from the pressing need to address the chronic shortage of housing and related supportive services that has contributed to the high numbers of persons living in temporary accommodations.

In the initial forty informal discussions that were held in Winnipeg, participants raised four areas of concern: (1) lack of affordable housing; (2) lack of support networks; (3) lack of information; and (4) institutional discrimination. These four areas were explored in greater detail as the research progressed, and to a large extent, each area was confirmed as being problematic for the wider sample. In particular, it is clear that there is a shortage of quality and affordable housing and mechanisms are needed to better connect persons to the supports they require to better their present situation.

Furthermore, the frequency with which respondents raised concerns of discriminatory practices needs to be further addressed to more precisely understand why this was echoed so strongly in each of the three cities.

Perhaps to understand the results of this work is best represented in the first survey question that simply asked respondents to define what they meant by "home." There is no doubt that defining home was a complex as it resulted in multiple interpretations. In this research home applied to many aspects of life that sometimes included the "physical house" but for most it was more of an intangible feeling such as "home where you were born and raised" or "where my family grew up." To

others home was a place where they sought safety and refuge: "Somewhere you can go anytime. Somewhere you can feel safe and not have to worry about violence. A place where you won't get kicked out on the street. Home is supposed to be a safe place where you can go. Home is supposed to be yours and it is supposed to be a special place where you can to have some privacy. It's supposed to be your temple."

Home also evoked an emotional attachment to family and friends: "a safe place where friends and family can come to see me and be able to enjoy the basic comforts (hot water, food plumbing, heat, security and laundry)." Another person offered home is "a place that is safe, comfortable. Somewhere you can raise a child." Perhaps the words of one person, to whom we titled the report after, sums up the meaning and power of home in saying "home for me is where the heart is at and right now that is nowhere so I am homeless." These words clearly echoed the challenges that surfaced in the comments.

Many contended that home was a place that they could exert control over and independence in thinking and acting, it was about having a space such as one person who observed: "a home for me would be someplace where I can rest and forget about the world and my problems, it would be a place where I don't have to listen to other people's problems for a while."

It was clear that home was a house and that meant having a clean place that was free of maintenance problems and was affordable. However, too often, home appeared to as a distant thought, something that was just out of reach. Participants often spoke with emotion and a desire for a better life: "a place where you have people around that love you" or "a house where you live everyday with your family." It was this type of sentiment that emphasized the fact that so many lacked home, but felt that it was out there even if was momentarily unattainable.

The words of respondents also confirmed that for many, finding a place to call home remains a challenge that is hard to overcome. It is hoped that this report was able to articulate the complexity of this issues and that all too often many are left without "someplace that you can call yours, a place where your stuff is. A place you feel comfortable ." Within this research we also learned a valuable lesson; that was that the 'process of conducting the research" was a vital as the final outcome. This meant

that the time spent in each community, collecting information and building the necessary relationships allowed the research team to connect better with those who participated in the study. This thought is important in understanding the value of including the Talking Circle, which was more of an expression of the research process rather than a means from which to collect more data. The researchers wanted to embrace indigenous approaches and perhaps in a few small ways, we took some steps in moving in this direction.

Conclusions

This research was guided by three research questions that were posed in the introduction of this report. The following discussion provides insights from the study that address these research questions:

1. What are the general characteristics of the hidden homeless population among Aboriginal persons, and has the pattern of migration into large urban centres played a contributing factor in exacerbating the extent of hidden homelessness?

2. To what extent does the condition and availability of the housing stock, and housing services, exacerbate the hidden homelessness situation in prairie cities?

3. How are governments, community -based organizations and support agencies addressing the needs of Aboriginal people who experience hidden homelessness in Winnipeg Saskatoon and Regina?

The focus of the first research question relates to the characteristics of Aboriginal persons experiencing hidden homelessness, and the effect of migration to urban centres on this phenomenon. Overall, the results of the study suggest that:

1. Aboriginal persons experiencing hidden homelessness a diverse group represented by males and females, youth, single parent families, elders, and, increasingly, families.

2. The reasons for housing distress amongst this group are wide-ranging, however, all suffer from overwhelming poverty and the lack of adequate shelter.

3. The primary concern for the majority of respondents in the sample was the inability to access a permanent residence.

4. For many Aboriginal peoples, migration from rural communities to urban areas creates a complex dynamic between their inability to find appropriate accommodation in the city and their connections to home.

The second research question refers to the condition and availability of housing stock and the provision of housing services in Prairie cities. Specifically, the question poses whether the inadequacies of housing provision exacerbate hidden homelessness amongst Aboriginal peoples. Two main responses were generated from this question:

1. There is a significant shortage of affordable shelter accommodations for the urban Aboriginal population in Canadian Prairie cities to address both short- and long-term needs.

2. Despite the lack of housing provision, most respondents indicated that they had social supports that assisted them in maintaining a roof over their heads. This social support distinguishes absolute homelessness from hidden homelessness. Moreover, this social support network "hides" the problem of Aboriginal hidden homelessness from mainstream society.

The third question asks how government, organizations and agencies are attempting to address the needs of Aboriginal people who experience hidden homelessness in Prairie cities. The study found:

1. Most program responses to hidden homelessness are reactive rather than proactive. In order to eliminate hidden homelessness, programming must establish long-term goals that will lead to permanent housing.

2. In each Prairie city, supportive networks do exist for the hidden homeless Aboriginal population. These supports span a continuum that ranges from formal to informal supports. In addition, individuals staying temporarily also contribute support to the household through contributions to the rent as well as in-kind support such as childcare.

3. A paradigm shift is occurring with the downloading of services to the community level. With increasing demand on community agencies, their resources are being strained. Nonetheless, the grassroots foundation of these agencies has allowed the development of supportive networks that would not be possible in government programming.

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6.3 Hidden Homelessness among Aboriginal Peoples in Prairie Cities

Recommendations

The following recommendations are outlined in relation to the core themes of the study (mobility, shelter and services).

Mobility

Further investigation is required to gain a better understanding of the complex dynamic between home communities and urban centres for Aboriginal peoples. In particular, focus should be on the hidden homeless experiences of those in the sample who indicated a connection with their reserve resulting in movement between reserve and urban centres.

Programming must be established to address the hyper-mobility of Aboriginal peoples in urban areas. It is only with substantive increases in housing provision, both on and off reserve, that the "churn" of Aboriginal peoples will be recognized.

Shelter

Increased funding is required for the construction of transitional and permanent housing units to accommodate both short-term needs, such as migrating to the city, as well long-term needs, such as those wishing to reside in urban centres.

Choices in housing design must be expanded and diversified to incorporate Aboriginal culturally appropriate housing for the Aboriginal population. For example, such housing could accommodate the tradition of maintaining three- and four-generation households through multi-generational housing units and guest accommodation.

Recognition must be accorded to emerging literature that promotes a holistic approach to the provision of housing. Based on this approach, housing represents far more than shelter and incorporates a range of services that enables Aboriginal peoples to sustain an independent lifestyle in a metropolitan centre.

The overwhelming message of participants in the study was that access to shelter is significantly hindered by systemic barriers that include perceived discrimination by landlords, as well as requirements for references and damage deposits, especially for those new arrivals that lack local connections and financial means.

These barriers must be addressed to facilitate access to housing for Aboriginal peoples experiencing housing distress.

Services and Support

The significance of informal support networks (such as family members providing shelter or assistance) for the hidden homeless in the Aboriginal population must be acknowledged. Moreover, the critical nature of this support must be formally solidified so that financial resources will be available to those households that are providing shelter to the hidden homeless. This might take the form of an innovative program that recognizes the unique circumstances of those in need of shelter and the role of friends and family in providing care .

Increases in shelter assistance programs are required to allow greater access to housing through increases in shelter dollars. For example, in Manitoba, the shelter assistance rates, which have not increased substantially since the early 1990s, must be addressed to match the current market conditions, which have increased dramatically. In addition, access to shelter assistance programs needs to be better communicated to those in housing distress to ensure that they are all aware of all of their options to address their situation.

For example, in Winnipeg, there are numerous organizations and agencies that provide programs ranging from temporary or emergency accommodation to long-term, affordable options. In addition, government subsidized housing programs also exist that provide shelter on a rent to income ratio or provide shelter assistance payments to those in need. While many of these programs have extensive wait-lists, it is suggested by the outcome of this research that many in critical need of shelter are sometimes unaware of the programs and options available to address their shelter needs. Therefore, continuing to disseminate information about existing programs and supports is one small piece of the solution.

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