Research into Urban Aboriginal Homelessness: Winnipeg and Regina

15 October 2001

Working Title: "Indian City: The Journey Home"

Introduction

To be homeless in a country sometimes ranked by the United Nations as the country with the highest standard of living in the world is twisted irony of the most piercing kind.

To be Aboriginal and homeless in this country is doubly ironic, doubly painful.

Oneida (Six Nations) comedian, Charlie Hill, does a biting routine comparing the arrival of the white man on this continent with "your in-laws arriving at your door, uninvited, and staying for five hundred years……." If Charlie were to take the analogy one step further, not only do the in-laws stay, but they also take over the house and the yard. You, my friend, are on the street.

The five hundred year history of mainstream Canada's turbulent relationship with its Aboriginal population, now estimated to be one million strong, is filled with tragedy and shame. The impact of misguided intentions and wrong decisions is still being felt decades, sometimes centuries, after the fact. Residential school experiences, foster care mismanagement, violence, and substance abuse ripple through communities, fracturing families and leaving some children without pride or hope. Most reserves offer few employment and economic opportunities for youth beyond basic education, so it's no surprise when they leave for the bright lights of the city, looking for some kind of future.

On the Prairies, their travelling may lead them to the Main Street Strip in Winnipeg or the North Central area of Regina, where they find easy access to all the trappings of 'street culture'. Some stay there only awhile, while others become chronic 'travelers', held hostage by alcohol, drugs, gang life, the sex trade, or the loss of hope that pervades all life on the street.

This research is a journey into Aboriginal street culture, where the homeless people themselves serve as guides. Although sad, sometimes even shocking, their stories shed light, and hope, on an issue long ignored in Canadian society.

Purpose ***1***

The purpose of the research was to explore the issue of Aboriginal homelessness in Winnipeg in order to find answers to these questions:

1. What is Aboriginal homelessness? What does it mean for an individual to be both Aboriginal and homeless? Is there a possibility that this state is different from homelessness in the mainstream community? If so, how?

2. What are the roots of Aboriginal homelessness? What are the contributing factors?

3. What solutions are there to this problem? What has helped some Aboriginal homeless people to change their lives around? What needs to happen to deal with the issue in a thoughtful and strategic way so that more people will be positively impacted?

Outcomes

Two deliverables were established at the outset:

1. A written report on the process and results of the research
2. A videotape of the interviews on location in Winnipeg and Regina

Methodology

The methodology was determined, in large part, by the nature of the deliverables. The research process had to satisfy the need for a standard written report and for a less formal video presentation of information. This meant that, while a project strategy could be planned with fairly broad brush strokes, some adaptations needed to be made, especially in terms of timelines and subject availability. The strong advantage of this "dual track" research methodology is that the camera provided a "visual memory" and a depth of information that sometimes only became obvious on third or fourth viewing.

Was subject response affected by the camera? The presence of a large Betacam might have been intimidating to some subjects, but this reaction was avoided as much as possible by the use of a small unobtrusive digital camera throughout the project (Sony PD 150).

Methodology (cont'd)

The research topic itself also impacted on the methodology. "Homelessness", like other aspects of human behaviour, is not a subject best restricted to the confines of formal academic research. Perhaps, this is one reason for the scarcity of written material regarding Aboriginal homelessness in Canada.

The overarching strategy for the research was to meet 'homelessness' where it lives, at ground level, on the streets of Winnipeg and Regina. Therefore, the methodology was designed to highlight the humanity behind the label and underneath all the statistics.

Essentially, the research process was completed in the following stages over a three month period:

1. Background Information:

A review of the literature was conducted to establish a broad base of information about homelessness in Canada. Because of the nature of this project, documentary videos were also reviewed and contacts made with representatives of the media in Winnipeg.

2. Contact with the General Public:

Ten "streeters" were videotaped in downtown Winnipeg. These interviews were conducted randomly on three separate days to determine the attitudes of the general public towards Aboriginal homelessness.

3. Contact with the Media:

This was approached first through a scan of the literature. Secondly, two Winnipeg journalists, who had recently worked on stories related to homelessness, were interviewed.

4. Contact with Agencies:

Using the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg as a starting point, ten agencies that work with Aboriginal homeless clients were approached for interviews. With four exceptions, these interviews, which were conducted with managers, were not videotaped. The exceptions were Spirit Island in Winnipeg, an informally organized community group, and Street Workers Advocacy Program (SWAP), the Friendship Centre, and The Gathering Place, all in Regina.

Methodology (cont'd)

5. Contact with Homeless Individuals:

Through referrals from agencies and other sources, contact was made with Aboriginal homeless people in Winnipeg and Regina. Individuals who had been homeless at one point in their lives, but were no longer on the streets, were also included in this section.

In all, seventeen individuals were contacted. Two interviews were conducted over the phone. Two focus groups were held, one in Winnipeg which included seven people, and one in Regina, which was attended by three homeless individuals. Both sessions were videotaped as were the five individual interviews.

6. Contact with Friends and Family of Homeless Individuals:

This piece of the methodology proved most challenging because of time restrictions and difficult logistics. However, two family members of one previously homeless individual were interviewed at their home on a reserve north of Winnipeg. The trip to Peguis Reserve and the interview were videotaped.

Anecdotal summaries, which were written to record the various stages of the research, are included in the Appendix to this report.

More specific interview results with three groups (General Public, Agencies, Homeless Individuals) are presented in table format in the next section.

Question #1: What is the meaning of homelessness in the Aboriginal community?

Homelessness is typically described in terms of housing.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness in Washington, D.C. says that the sole common characteristic of homeless people is that they do not have housing. If homelessness is to end, more housing must be made available to poor and low income people.

Canadian author Barbara Murphy ("On the Street: How We Created the Homeless", 2001) agrees that poverty and housing are interwoven:

> "…at the root of homelessness is poverty and the shocking reality is that we are now tolerating a level of poverty that leaves so many without a roof over their heads."

Murphy describes Winnipeg as having the largest and fastest growing Aboriginal population in the country. The author further claims that three quarters of the Aboriginal population in the Core Area of Winnipeg have problems with housing and that most Aboriginal families living in the Core Area spend half their income on rent.

In Regina, the File Hills/Qu'Appelle Tribal Council provided a broad definition of homelessness. It's a term applied to people who:

- Have no home
- Live in emergency shelters or hostels
- Live in homes that do not meet adequate standards
- Have problems with their house suitability and affordability
- Spend more than 30% of their household income on housing
- People who do not have a permanent residence
- People who have not been in their own place within the last 30 days
- Have total absence of shelter

They further identify three distinct categories of homelessness: chronic (over extended periods of time), episodic (alternating between sheltered and unsheltered) and situational (result of acute life crisis).

Analysis **Question #1**

Over the period of this research study, Aboriginal individuals that would fit into at least one of the above categories and conditions were identified. However, while the definition quoted above is a complete description of "homelessness" from a bureaucratic or academic perspective, the results of this research study indicate that to ignore the complex human side of the issue is to do a disservice to a complete understanding of urban Aboriginal homelessness.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness would seem to agree, when they conclude:

> "Even if there was a ready and abundant supply of affordable housing and all homeless people had incomes that allowed them to live independently, *many people who are homeless would still require assistance to overcome the problems that interfere with their independence."*

So while poverty and lack of shelter are common elements in homelessness, they do not tell the whole story in mainstream society or in the Aboriginal community.

In "Aboriginal Peoples and Homelessness", The Institute of Urban Studies at The University of Winnipeg identified race as a significant factor in vulnerability to homelessness in Canada (1997, p.10). In another study the same year, the Institute concluded that the risk factors for homelessness are more commonplace and more intensely experienced among Native people. Once again racism was identified as a relevant factor along with substandard housing, rural-urban migration and cultural dislocation. As well, Aboriginal homeless people appear to be more affected by substance abuse issues, and less by mental health issues, except those arising secondary to substance abuse.

In the Aboriginal community, "street-involved" may be a more accurate term than "homeless". It's not just an absence of income or housing; it's immersion in the culture of the street, identified by so many of the individuals interviewed for this study.

> "When I lived on the reserve, I wanted to move to the bright lights….but when I came to the city I got involved in street gangs, drugs, having a good time.."
>
> - Albert Ratt, former street person

Analysis **Question #1**

> "I moved into the city when I was 9 and moved in with my dad. My cousin got me into sniffing and on the streets, so I've been sniffing, drinking, doing all sorts of drugs."
>
> - Charlotte, street person

> "I was lost when I first came to the city….didn't have a spiritual connection. When people come to the city, fear overwhelms them and they forget their spiritual connection…they feel so low in themselves."
>
> - Simon. Former street person

People often have a place to stay but not a place to live. They 'couch surf' or take a room temporarily so that an address can be sent into Welfare, as Hawk and other clients at the Main Street Project do. They are adrift in a way of life that has day-to-day survival as the bottom line.

Dexter, who died in August, had lived this existence for most of his fifty years. He theorized that life on the street has a distinct pecking order:

> "The prostitutes and the dealers are on top. Then there's the working men, you know those that can afford to pay for company. Then there's the drinkers and the tokers, followed by those on other drugs. At the bottom you got the sniffers."

Given the hierarchy, which seems to be based on the simple economics of survival, there is also a sense of family and community.

> "The people I hang around with on the streets, I call them family. They're really close to me. They help me through good and bad."
>
> - Charlotte, street person

> "We all know each other….give each other hope that you're not walking alone."
>
> - Brenda, street person

> "These people get cleaned up (in detox)…..and then they go right back out on the streets. That's where their family is. What else are they going to do?"
>
> - Dexter, Former street person, now deceased

Analysis **Question #1**

Life on the street is also characterized by vulnerability, risk and physical danger.

> "When you're working the streets, people throw things at you…insults, eggs,…it's hard to change when the labels stay the same."
>
> - Penny Sinclair, former street person

Gangs are a threat to the safety of street people.

> "Some IP (Indian Posse) guy came up to me, and said if you need protection, come and see me. But I don't want protection from them. Native people are supposed to stick together, not kill each other off."
>
> - Karen, street person

Sometimes, the very people who are charged with maintaining public order pose the greatest danger to people living on the street.

> "As for the cops, I can't stand them. They'd be the last people I'd call for help."
>
> - Bernadine, street person

> "They (the police) kicked me right out of my chair… popped the bone right out of my leg…and they said: 'Try proving that.. Nobody'll believe you. You're nobody.'"
>
> - Brenda, street person

Addictions are endemic to "street culture". Alcohol, cocaine and a host of other drugs, including sniff, mask the pain of daily life. For many, the daily fix takes precedence over shelter and food as the primary survival requirement.

> "The only time you feel alive is when you're high…..When you're high, everything's okay, everything's cool. So you lie, steal, cheat, do anything to get it, anything.The next high is all you've got to look forward to."
>
> - Bernadine, street person

Analysis **Question #1**

For needy and, perhaps, addicted Aboriginal youth, life on the street often means sexual exploitation. Youth leave the reserves looking for a better life in the city and find themselves easy prey for gangs, pimps and drugs. Ninety percent of young sex workers in Winnipeg are Aboriginal (Penny Sinclair, Thunderbird House).

In their 1999 song, "Indian City", the local Native band, Eagle and Hawk, sing of Aboriginal street culture in Winnipeg:

> "Got a taxi cruising down Main Street on a welfare Saturday night
> You feel the squeal of the tires at the red light
> Hear the click of the minivan door lock tight.
>
> Take a stroll past a brother in an alleyway
> Treat a low track sister to a smile
> I'm sure you think that what you see is just the face of Indian City.
>
> Take a day inside the skin
> Take a trip in a child's heart
> Spend a night afraid to sleep
> See a family being ripped apart
> Another day without a meal
> Another week without a hug
> Another year without a job
> Another life without love."
>
> (Used with permission, Rising Sun Productions, September, 2001)

In the urban Aboriginal community, according to some of the people who live there, being "homelessness" usually means being "street involved" sometimes temporarily, often for a lifetime. It's an abandonment of the Traditions and community values, which may have guided reserve life in the past, and the formation of a cultural sub-group, defined as "street culture".

Life on the street is doing whatever it takes to survive until the next day, even if that means a loss of dignity. Murphy (2001) writes:

> "The beggar is challenging society for recognition
> and, in the process, is challenging the stigma
> attached to poverty and exclusion."

Agreement with the first part of Murphy's statement was evident from the interviews conducted with members of the general public on the streets of Winnipeg.

Analysis Question #1

Most (70% of the sample interviewed) did, in fact, recognize that there were many homeless Aboriginal people on the streets of Winnipeg. Thirty percent, however, volunteered that they thought Aboriginal people begging on the streets were responsible for their own circumstances. And 20% didn't notice them at all.

This somewhat indifferent reaction may be due, in part, to a lack of media focus on the issue. It is also born out by a 1997 Ekos poll which found that Canadians give Aboriginal housing the lowest priority rating among all choices for increased federal spending ("On the Street: How We Created the Homeless", 2001).

Conrad Lavalley, Executive Director of the Regina Friendship Centre, an agency that offers some programs for urban Aboriginal people, states:

> "Society has become immune to the problems that affect us. It's easy for the government not to take the initiative."

Managers at other agencies agree that Aboriginal "homelessness" is a complex issue that needs to be addressed. It's not just housing. According to 67% of the agency managers interviewed, substance abuse issues are critical, yet only one of the six agencies included in this section of the research offers people a program to quit their addiction(s).

***Medicine Wheel analysis introduced here.**

Analysis **Question #2**

Question #2: What are the root causes and contributing factors?

> "When people today say that there is a crisis in homelessness, they don't know their history."
>
> - Jim Sinclair, former homeless person

From a historical perspective, Canada was 'home' to Aboriginal peoples for thousands of years before the arrival of the Europeans. Five hundred years ago, that began to change. By the early part of the 20th century, Native people were being confined to designated lands, called 'reserves', their lives soon to be regulated by federal legislation known as "The Indian Act". Even now, few reserves have sufficient economic development to sustain even partial employment of band members; sometimes the only economy is based on handing out the welfare checks.

> "People were pushed onto small tracts of land with housing so bad you could see through the walls…. what we see today is nothing more than neglect; the system is not working."
>
> - Jim Sinclair, former homeless person

Defined as non-status under The Indian Act, Jim Sinclair's family was not allowed to live on the reserve, but instead became squatters, "road allowance people". In the 1940's, his family lived in tent communities set up next to the nuisance grounds in towns and cities. This experience in "homelessness" over fifty years ago led Jim to become an activist, leading the fight for the entrenchment of Aboriginal (First Nations, Metis, and Inuit) rights in Canada's Constitution.

Throughout the 20th century, until 1988 when the last residential school was closed, it was the law in Canada that Native children were to be given an education in boarding schools operated by Catholic and Protestant churches. Indian agents, working for the federal government, would ensure that all school age children living on reserves would be taken away from their families and placed in residential schools.

Some families would see their children only during the summer holidays for the next eight or ten years of their lives. Some families would never see their children again. Children returning to live on the reserves as young adults often found they didn't fit into the community they thought was their home.

Their search for a place where they did belong led to a pattern of frequent movement between city and reserve. Their language and traditions had been taken away in Residential School resulting in the cultural dislocation mentioned earlier in this report (page 2). Some experienced physical, sexual and emotional abuse while attending church-run schools. The combined negative effects on families, communities and the culture itself would be felt through subsequent generations.

Under the jurisdiction of Child and Family Services, Native children who were neglected or abused in their families were taken away and placed in non-Aboriginal settings. Some were adopted by white Americans and raised in the United States; others were in perpetual foster care until old enough to run away. Then in a reversal of policy, Aboriginal children were allowed to return to their originating reserves or, in the case of American adoptees, to be 'repatriated'. Once again, the lives of children and entire communities were disrupted.

Alcohol abuse, family violence, suicide, sexual exploitation, all became features of life on economically impoverished reserves. Jim Sinclair, who won his own struggle with alcohol forty years ago, remembers travelling to reserves in Northern Saskatchewan as a young activist:

> "You couldn't find anyone sober to have a meeting. Everyone was poor and struggling……and drinking. Sometimes, I would wait days to have a meeting."

Penny Sinclair of Thunderbird House, who started drinking at the age of nine and who was a victim of sexual abuse as a child, tells of the experience:

> "Kids start to talk about the abuse and try to get help. They tell people they are being abused. Then they get passed around from home to home where they get abused more and more. The offenders go through Traditional healing and they are welcomed back with open arms. The girls are shamed for talking about everybody's little secret. They are shamed even more, the abuse gets worse and they're forced to leave (the reserve)."

Brenda, a sex worker, also came from an abusive background. At the age of ten, she started to carry drugs for people. Now, at 34, she still works the street and uses alcohol, sniff and coke to reduce her sense of loneliness and to mask the memory of early abuse.

Analysis Question #2

The destructive behaviour and mental anguish that results from a lifetime of abuse and deprivation cripples people and allows them no other choice in life but life on the street.

Kenny, a street person, from Regina describes this life as a "rough road…you have to take it a day at a time." Candace, also a client of SWAP (Street Workers Advocacy Program in Regina) agrees and adds another dimension of Aboriginal street culture:

> "There are a lot of racists in this city. I've been called 'savage' and 'neechi' (squaw) and 'drunken Indian'. They don't even know us……if they put themselves in our shoes, they'd feel as shitty as hell and they'd think twice before calling us down."

Brenda in Winnipeg echoes this response:

> "I'm a human being. Not just an Indian.
> Not just a useless whore on the street.
> I'm somebody.
> And it's time they (society) started treating women
> And people on the streets as human beings
> And not just the scum of the Earth."

Isolated, victimized, and ignored, urban Aboriginal street people are trapped in a lifestyle that is painful, destructive and degrading. They are also adrift in Canadian society without a sense of where they belong, or if they belong.

As the preceding section has explained, a direct link exists between the events of history and the present day vulnerability of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. This vulnerability is painfully and dramatically exemplified in the lives of the 'street involved' people who participated in this research.

The general public, however, does not have the same awareness. Thirty percent of the respondents stated that they thought addictions, unemployment and lack of family support were contributing factors in Aboriginal homelessness. One person understood Aboriginal homelessness from an historical perspective:

> " I think what we've done is similar to a holocaust but Aboriginal people have to live. We don't kill them but we let them kill themselves."
>
> - Member of the General Public

Analysis ***Question #2***

Only one individual blamed the homeless people themselves:

> "Some people just like living that way, I guess."
>
> - Member of the General Public

A third person, also alone in his opinion, stated:

> "A lot of people falling through the cracks because they don't get the services they need…."
>
> - Member of the General Public

In contrast, 100% of the representatives agreed that Aboriginal homelessness has its roots in dysfunctional society. They listed a wide range of contributing factors: poverty, isolation, family instability, substance abuse, unemployment, moving off of reserves, and loss of community.

****2nd Medicine Wheel here***

Question #3: What are the solutions?

"You can't leave a people victimized for too long."

- Jim Sinclair

Albert Ratt succeeded in making it off the street ten years ago and is determined that his children will not spend their early years as he did, moving from foster home to foster home, running with gangs, addicted to alcohol. He attributes his success to quitting drinking which he accomplished through an AA program and to meeting a friend who "never ever gave up" on him. He was able to come to terms with the abuse he suffered as a child and was able to forgive his abusers, especially his father who first abused and then abandoned him.

What keeps him from returning to the streets? His immediate family and his mother, with whom he has stayed in touch over the years. Albert believes:

> "The family foundation is like very important, like building on solid rock…..My family was blown apart, but now we're healing."

Penny Sinclair made a decision to leave the street a year ago. She was a cocaine addict for four years, but found that quitting alcohol was the toughest challenge for her. Having a daughter inspired her to change her life. She has become a community activist, working to help other Aboriginal youth make it out of the cycle of abuse and exploitation.

Jim Sinclair, at almost 70, is respected as an elder in Aboriginal communities across the country. Quitting drinking over forty years ago is one of his life's triumphs. Getting control over his own life meant that he had greater credibility in helping other people make positive changes in theirs.

In the process of healing their lives, these individuals managed to escape the street and find 'freedom' in other, healthier ways.

> "When I was on the street, I felt there was nobody on the face of this earth that could tell me about life….I knew it all. But freedom on the street is false. The freedom I experience today is the real freedom

I've always desired." -Albert Ratt

Analysis **Question #3**

They also build family connections and look for ways to contribute to the community. Penny with the development of "Freedom's Door", a safe house for Aboriginal youth who are being sexually exploited, Albert in his work with street people at DownTown Biz, and Jim with over 40 years of leadership in the Aboriginal community in Saskatchewan and nationally.

They are 'experiential' workers: individuals with direct personal experience related to issues like alcoholism, sex work, or street life. When they talk with Aboriginal people, they can speak with integrity about the issues. For example, Albert has found that by telling his life story, he can encourage people to move on to healthier lifestyles. He offers hope to people whose horizon is limited by substance abuse, racism, poverty, and violence.

At the Street Workers Advocacy Project (SWAP) in Regina, Executive Director Barb Lawrence recognizes the potential in the agency's clients:

> "We encourage people to work with us in every aspect of the program because they are the experts and we need to learn from them……. work must be done to make Aboriginal people feel respected, that their voice is needed; that they are true partners in the process."

At SWAP, there are a number of ways for clients to be heard. As 51% of the Board must consist of individuals with experience on the street, clients may serve as Board members. When programs are designed and implemented, the clients' needs are taken into consideration. SWAP is not an agency that is only open from 9am to 5pm.

Barb Lawrence feels that agencies play a critical role in getting people off the street.

> "We have to change our way of working…change our attitudes, take some responsibility….own up to the fact that we made a lot of mistakes in this community. We need to get our shit together."

Jim Sinclair agrees. He asks: *"How are we going to get our children back?"* and then answers his own question by saying: *"By accepting responsibility for where we are."*

Analysis Question #3

To move forward, the Aboriginal community must get out of denial about drinking and drugs. There is a need now to deal with issues squarely, says Jim. He uses two examples:

- HIV/Aids is rampant on some northern reserves and people don't know why they're dying;
- It costs $1 million dollars to raise and support an individual diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome; this in contrast with the $10,000 it might cost to keep a pregnant woman clean and sober.

Aboriginal families and communities must be re-built; child-rearing de-institutionalized. There is, according to Jim, a mechanism already in place for this process to begin to happen. The treaties are there to be re-vitalized by people willing to claim their democratic rights.

"We have to take up citizenship in our own home."

He would find no disagreement from Simon at Spirit Island across from The Forks in Winnipeg. The grassroots group has taken over a point of land that was allotted to the Aboriginal community when The Forks lands were first being developed. The group operates according to Traditional healing principles and offers counselling for alcohol abuse.

> "We have a lot of homeless in this area…we ask people to participate…they're always welcome."

Jason, a young Aboriginal man living on Spirit Island, who responded to this invitation, talked about his purpose in life:

> "I grew up thinking that I would be nothing more than a drunken sniffer on Main Street begging for change……instead of reacting, I figured I should act.....my purpose is to make people aware that Native people are interested in helping themselves."

Native people interested in helping themselves. To find a solution to homelessness. To create agencies that are responsible and accountable. To re-build communities that aren't ghettoes. To get the children back.

Conclusions 1

1. Aboriginal Homelessness is different from mainstream homelessness.

From causation to behavioural manifestation, many aspects of Aboriginal homelessness are different.

In fact, this report found that the term 'homeless' may not be appropriate in the context of the Aboriginal community. 'Street involved' or 'street culture' would seem to be better descriptors, given the dynamics of the lifestyle observed on the streets.

The roots of homelessness in the Aboriginal community lie in the negative impacts of federal government policies, implemented over the past several hundred years. Put simply, what is viewed as homelessness is really an after effect of the colonization process. To an extent, 'street involvement' is both chronic and endemic in the urban Aboriginal community.

2. Aboriginal Homelessness is not just about housing.

In two studies of Aboriginal homelessness in Winnipeg (The Institute of Urban Studies, University of Winnipeg, 1997), a strong point is made about the special needs of homeless Aboriginal people. Interestingly, the same needs, and others, have been highlighted throughout this study, completed some four years later.

- Improved housing on reserves
- Community development/jobs
- Self determination
- Traditional healing techniques
- Aboriginal service providers/culturally appropriate services

Homelessness in the Aboriginal community is not just about affordable, accessible, and suitable housing. And any discussions of the issue or proposed solutions to the problem of Aboriginal homelessness must reflect this larger picture.

3. Substance Abuse is a critical factor in Aboriginal 'street involvement'.

Throughout this study, the chronic abuse of alcohol and other drugs was a factor in every 'street person's' life. Paradoxically, only one agency contacted within the course of the study (Main Street Project, Winnipeg) dealt with this issue directly through formal programs and processes.

Individuals who had been successful in leaving 'the street' lifestyle behind them all said that quitting drinking was a big, if not the biggest, challenge they faced.

Twelve Step programs sometimes use the expression, "There's a pink elephant in the living room." to describe the twin psychological processes of denial and avoidance which can prevent individuals and people around them from confronting destructive, addictive behaviours.

There's a pink elephant 'on the street'.

Strategies designed to help 'street involved' Aboriginal people recover their lives must recognize this fact and build in programming around substance abuse issues.

4. Within the Aboriginal community, there are resilient grassroots leaders.

During the course of this research study, several individuals shared their stories of struggle and triumph over 'the street' with a great deal of frankness and humility. All used their life experiences to make a positive impact on their community, to help other people see that they, too, could make healthier choices in their lives.

The challenge will be to create a strategy and to build agencies that maximize these sometimes hidden human resources. Offering training in a variety of skill areas, management or counselling, for example, would enhance the chances of 'experiential' workers succeeding in their new roles.

5. Models exist for successful Aboriginal-run agencies.

The well-established Native Women's Transition Centre in Winnipeg is one example; Street Workers Advocacy Program (SWAP) in Regina is another. Spirit Island, recently underway at the Forks in Winnipeg, is an example of a more informal, less bureaucratic, approach to healing.

The Native Women's Transition Centre offers culturally-appropriate services and programs for Native women and children. SWAP ensures that its clients have opportunities for their voices to be heard on almost every aspect of the Program's management. Spirit Island invites Aboriginal people to be part of a healing community that practises Traditional beliefs.

All three agencies, although different from each other in mandate and scope, have found effective ways to meet the diverse needs of Aboriginal people.

6. Racism is another 'pink elephant'.

This issue played peekaboo with the research study. It's the question that few people wanted to address with the camera rolling, its absence from some discussions an indication of its importance.

News reports about the relationship between the police and Aboriginal people on the street in Saskatoon brought this issue to the forefront. In Regina, almost every individual interviewed for this study reported incidents involving racism and the police.

That racism plays a role in the lives of 'street-involved' Aboriginal people is not in doubt, but the specific nature of that role deserves more attention than was possible in this research study.

7. The Canadian public is indifferent to Aboriginal homelessness.

Barbara Murphy, author of "On the Street: How We Created the Homeless" (2001), writes of homelessness in the Aboriginal community:

> "We enter the 21st century with a better understanding of the solutions *but almost complete public indifference to their implementation."*

Conrad Lavalley, Executive Director of the Regina Friendship Centre agrees that mainstream Canadians are not concerned about the plight of Aboriginal Canadians.

> "*Society has become immune to the problems that affect us*. We shouldn't let the issue of homelessness die. We should keep it on the forefront, in the minds of the politicians."

How does indifference end and implementation of solutions begin?

The question brings up issues of power, responsibility and accountability, which may be beyond the scope of this report. However, it is also an entirely suitable note on which to conclude.

Perhaps, it's time to reflect on the voices of the people, those who have made it off 'the street' and those that haven't. Aboriginal people are resilient survivors. Mainstream Canada needs to acknowledge their strength and their vitality and invite their full participation in Canadian society as respected and equal citizens.