



Aboriginal Women and Homelessness

An Issue Paper

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Background

Aboriginal people are over-represented in the homeless population in Canada. The City of Winnipeg, for example, has the largest Aboriginal identity population of all Canadian cities. While 8.4% of the population (55,755 people) identified themselves as Aboriginal in 2001, estimates suggest that between 60 – 70 % of the homeless population of Winnipeg was Aboriginal.¹ The experience of other urban areas is similar. The Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) has an Aboriginal population of about 2%, while the proportion of Aboriginal people in the homeless population is approximately 30%. Figures for Toronto suggest a similar level of over-representation of Aboriginal people in the homeless population. Smaller cities also show the same pattern: in Sioux Lookout, for example, it was estimated that 99% of the homeless street population was Aboriginal.²

The experience of homelessness is different for Aboriginal women than for others. There are more women among the Aboriginal homeless population than are found in the non-Aboriginal population. In the GVRD, for example, 35% of the Aboriginal homeless population is female, compared to only 27% among the non-Aboriginal homeless population. Despite these higher proportions of Aboriginal women in the homeless population, services and programs are more oriented towards the male population. The availability of emergency beds and other services for Aboriginal women are limited even in the largest cities. In smaller cities and towns, services targeting homeless women are sometimes so constrained as to be virtually non-existent.

Homelessness affects individuals in different ways, depending on the causes of the homelessness and its duration. Personal factors that may lead to homelessness are experiences or events that are specific to the individual. Aboriginal women who are homeless may have experienced family violence that led them to abandon their home, or they may have experienced the end of a marriage or common law relationship that has resulted in their being required to leave the family home. Other family or relationship issues may also result in an individual becoming homeless: this is often the case for youth who leave the family home after conflict with one or both parents. Other personal factors that can lead to an individual becoming homeless include substance use or misuse, poor health and poor mental health.

Structural factors are also a cause of homelessness for many Aboriginal women. The negative impacts of residential schools on individuals and their families is a key causal factor. Other structural factors that result in homelessness or relative homelessness include:

- the shortage of housing in First Nations communities;

¹ Homelessness Resources Winnipeg,

² D. Sider, 2005.

- low minimum wage rates and low income assistance rates;
- the lack of affordable, appropriate housing;
- the condemnation or demolition of rental units, the conversion of rental units into condominiums or higher-cost rental units, and the elimination of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units; and
- the deinstitutionalization of individuals without adequate supports, and the release of individuals from jail without adequate supports.

Much of the response to homelessness in urban centres has been to provide temporary shelter and supports for individuals. Studies have shown that Aboriginal women and youth tend to underutilize the existing shelters or programs. This may be due to the lack of culturally appropriate services, or it may indicate that shelters and other supports have structural barriers that act to exclude Aboriginal women and youth. While some services have expanded, such as the provision of emergency shelter beds, there are very few supports available for individuals with multiple or special needs. For example, Aboriginal women who have mental health or substance use issues will find it very difficult to find an emergency shelter that will offer them space.

Aboriginal women who have children in their care experience even greater difficulties finding appropriate services and programs. Women with children often experience 'relative' homelessness; that is they pay a large proportion of their income for housing, and/or live in substandard or unsafe housing. This places them at risk for other consequences. The expenditure of a large proportion of their limited income on housing means that they are unable to afford food, clothing, medication or other necessities for themselves and their children. They are also at increased risk of losing their children to social service agencies, as their dwellings may be deemed to fail to meet minimum standards of safety and repair.

Women who require emergency shelter for themselves and their children often use specialized emergency shelters and Transition houses funded solely for this group. Again, the provision of supports and services through these venues does not meet the needs of Aboriginal women. Frequently, these shelters approach issues of family violence and homelessness through a 'justice' lens that does not accommodate a First Nations emphasis on healing. While there are some Aboriginal shelters and Transition houses, they are not adequate to meet the need. A further barrier is that shelters funded through INAC have received lower rates of support than those funded through other sources, which further hampers their viability and ability to provide programs and services.

In 1999, the federal government announced a federal response to the growing issue of homelessness in urban areas. Additional federal funds were provided to specific communities to organize local responses to homelessness and to provide programs and services that would meet the unique needs of the community. A separate and additional funding stream was made available for

programs and services that targeted homeless youth and Aboriginal people. This initiative was renewed in 2002, and has now been replaced by the federal Homelessness Partnering Strategy.

Current Status

Many communities and organizations have mobilized to respond to the needs of the growing homeless population. Programs such as the Street Patrols, which were originally started by Anishnawbe Health Toronto in 1989 provides examples of innovative and culturally appropriate services for homeless individuals. Many other Aboriginal organizations and service providers have also been able to access funding to operate emergency shelters or provide other services to homeless Aboriginal people. Even the term 'homeless' isn't appropriate as many Aboriginal people feel that they are home anywhere on Turtle Island and see themselves as 'house-less'.

The complexity of the problem of homelessness requires that resources from many areas of government and community must be included in the response. There is urgency to address the immediate and pressing needs of homeless individuals: however the programs and services that meet these immediate needs typically do not affect underlying root causes at the personal or structural level. This clearly indicates the need for a coordinated and comprehensive approach to reducing homelessness by not only addressing personal causal factors, but also by addressing policies and practices linked to structural causes of homelessness.

Much of the work on homelessness has focused on the needs of individuals in urban settings. While these areas are home to the largest concentration of homeless individuals, there are other areas that need further attention. Homelessness among those living on First Nations reserves has not been adequately addressed, nor has homelessness in remote or isolated communities. In addition, there are some sub-groups with special needs who are not well served by current models of program and service delivery. These groups include elderly homeless people, homeless individuals with mental illnesses or disabilities, and homeless youth who are under the legal age of consent.

Recommendations

1. Coordinate a comprehensive approach to reducing homelessness by addressing both personal and structural causes; address policies and approaches that perpetuate systemic homelessness.
2. Provide access to culturally appropriate services, such as shelters, safe houses and second stage housing, for all Aboriginal women and youth.

3. Ensure that resources are available to address all issues that negatively impact on Aboriginal women's well-being, including poverty, lack of housing, sexualized, racialized violence, employment, education, etc.
4. Resolve current shortages in safe, accessible, affordable housing available to Aboriginal women and their families through adequate funding for renovations and building of new units.
5. Provide funding to Aboriginal women's groups for research initiatives to address the systemic causes of women's homelessness.
6. Provide funding to Aboriginal women's groups for research initiatives to identify and address the homelessness in northern communities, among Aboriginal youth, and among Aboriginal women and youth with disabilities.
7. Resolve the lack of matrimonial real property protections for Aboriginal women living on reserve.

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