

# THE ROOTS OF ABORIGINAL HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

*By Andrew Leach, Chief Executive Officer of the Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA), British Columbia, Canada, and a member of the St'at'imc Nation*

*AHMA is the first, and only, Aboriginal off-reserve social housing authority in Canada, setting a benchmark for devolving government responsibilities to indigenous self-management*

## Introduction

Canada faces a national crisis in Aboriginal homelessness. While homelessness has also risen among the general population in recent decades, Aboriginal people are greatly over represented among the homeless.

For example, homelessness in Greater Vancouver, British Columbia, nearly doubled in three years, 2002 to 2005, and then increased another 20% by 2008, when nearly 2,600 people were homeless—1,046 staying at a shelter or other temporary housing and 1,547 living on the streets. But homelessness among Aboriginal people grew at a much faster rate (34%) than the general homeless population (21%). The 2008 homeless count in Greater Vancouver found that:

- 32% of homeless people were Aboriginal, even though Aboriginal people account for only 2% of the general population in the region
- Almost half (45%) of homeless women identified themselves as Aboriginal
- 41% of homeless youth identified themselves as Aboriginal

Similar situations prevail throughout Canada; Aboriginal homeless are over represented in all major cities. In some cities, more than 70% of homeless people are Aboriginal. Overall, Aboriginal people comprise less than 4% of the Canadian population, but more than 10% of the homeless population. Aboriginal Canadians are not only more likely to become homeless, but also less likely to use shelters and other support services, and more likely to remain homeless.

Current estimates put the number of homeless in Canada between 150,000 and 300,000 people. Homelessness costs Canadians between \$4.5 and \$6 billion a year.

Two systemic changes set the stage for a massive rise in homelessness in Canada, in the 1990s:

- 1) The federal government began housing cuts in the 1980s and stopped developing new subsidized, affordable housing in 1993. Growth in housing need began to outpace the number of available social housing units. Canada also made employment insurance qualifications more restrictive in the 1990s.
- 2) Residential real estate prices in major cities have more than doubled in the past 15 years, while real income stagnated or declined. Higher mortgages led landlords to increase rents dramatically.

Combined, these changes have prevented the most vulnerable Canadians from attaining affordable housing and impacted Aboriginal people more drastically than other populations.

### **Aboriginal History of Colonization in Canada**

Aboriginal homelessness correlates with the history of colonization in Canada; residential schools across the country, Aboriginal wardship in the child welfare system, displacement from traditional lands, and marginalization in Canadian society devastated families and cultural traditions.

No other Canadian group experienced this terrible legacy; no other Canadian group experiences the same degree of homelessness. On and off reserve, Aboriginal Canadians are disproportionately poor and vulnerable to homelessness.

### **Residential schools**

One of the most disempowering acts of colonization was residential schooling. As many as five generations of Aboriginal families—more than one million children—attended residential schools, with devastating consequences:

- Aboriginal children and youth suffered psychological, physical, and sexual abuse in staggering numbers
- Inadequate sanitation, nutrition and health care were common
- The unchecked spread of tuberculosis and other infectious diseases resulted in the deaths of thousands of Aboriginal children
- Children were not allowed to speak their native languages, and returned to families unable to communicate or learn from the oral histories of their people
- Removing Aboriginal children from their families led to a loss of parenting skills

- Residential schooling alienated many Aboriginal Canadians from formal education, resulting in a high rate of illiteracy
- Children were unable to learn about their culture, but also felt alienated from the mainstream education system, leading to a sense of hopelessness that some tried to dull with alcohol, drugs or suicide

### Land displacement

Treaties displaced Aboriginal people from their land and moved them to reserve settlements. But Aboriginal use of land and resources was severely limited, because the Indian Act of 1876 gave government sweeping powers to control resources on reserve land. Resource extraction put additional pressure on traditional economic activities like hunting. Aboriginal people were deprived of traditional ways to earn a living *and* denied opportunities to develop new resource enterprises.

Displacement, like residential schooling, contributed to diminished health, employment, economic opportunities and cultural connections, as well as to increased addiction.

### Risk Factors

Risk factors for Aboriginal homelessness include:

- Systemic barriers like poverty and lower education levels
- Unemployment, discrimination, patriarchy and the reserve system
- Disproportionate vulnerability among Aboriginal Canadians to family instability, addictions, fetal alcohol syndrome, poor health and social disconnection
- A shortage of affordable accommodation for urban Aboriginals
- Discrimination when trying to find accommodation
- Substance use makes people more likely to become homeless

### Faces of Aboriginal homelessness

Homeless Aboriginal people are men and women, youth and elders, single and two-parent families. Research has shown that a significant number of homeless Aboriginal people:

- Attended residential school,
- Had parents who attended residential school or had been in jail, or
- Had harmful experiences with child welfare authorities
- Nearly a third had been institutionalized

Aboriginal homelessness in rural areas contributes to urban Aboriginal homelessness, with migration between reserves and cities becoming a circular pattern. New arrivals to a city often live with friends or family in overcrowded conditions. Aboriginal people often find that discrimination, unaffordable housing, and social conditions push them back to reserves or rural areas.

In addition, homelessness among Aboriginal youth is on the rise. Canada's Aboriginal population is younger than the general population, and Aboriginal youth are the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population. A third of Canada's Aboriginal population is under the age of 14, half are under 25, and they experience higher unemployment and lower educational levels than the general population, which correlate with poverty and homelessness.

Most homeless youth had to leave home at an early age, and often come from foster or group homes, where Aboriginal children are over represented. For example, a study of homeless Aboriginal youth in Toronto, Ontario, found that most had grown up in the care of the Children's Aid Society. Many experienced various forms of abuse in these homes. Everyone said street life was better than the lives they had left behind.

### **Government responses to indigenous homelessness**

Beginning in the late 1990s, the federal government tried to address homelessness with three new programs:

- *National Homelessness Initiative* – NHI focused on three areas, urban, Aboriginal and youth homelessness. Projects were developed in partnership with municipal agencies and service providers.
- *Homelessness Partnering Strategy* – HPS includes funding for Aboriginal communities, a homelessness network, and offering surplus federal properties for projects that address homelessness. Communities must also obtain funding from other sources, such as municipal and private sector partnerships. HPS also provides emergency shelters with software to collect information about the homeless, which is currently used in about half of Canadian shelters.

- *Affordable Housing Initiative* – AHI aims to increase affordable off-reserve housing, and is currently funded until March 2011. Provinces match federal funds; each province designs and delivers its own program. The program funds rental housing, conversions to social housing, home ownership in rural and urban redevelopment areas, rent supplements, and housing for low-income seniors and people with disabilities. In BC, the provincial housing agency administers AHI funds in consultation with AHMA.

These federal programs fall short of solving Canada's homelessness crisis. AHI has been criticized for lack of a coherent goal and insufficient capacity to meet housing needs. The National Homelessness Initiative and Homelessness Partnering Strategy are intended to support underserved populations, but these programs increase demand for resources that communities have difficulty funding.

On the upside, these programs encourage supportive, grassroots networks. Agencies, advocates, and service providers now understand the benefits of collaborative governance, Aboriginal organizations are increasingly included in the planning process, and two HPS projects target culturally appropriate support for Aboriginal homeless people.

In addition, some provinces and major cities in Canada are tackling homelessness with programs that use both "treatment first" and "housing first" models:

- *Treatment first* – In this more traditional approach, participants progress along a continuum of housing, from temporary shelter to transitional housing to permanent housing, when they are determined to be "housing ready." People are required to abstain from drugs and alcohol and participate in mental health treatment, if needed.
- *Housing first* – This newer model provides participants with immediate access to permanent housing. Program staff make home visits; harm reduction services are available but voluntary. This approach costs less, and participants remain housed longer, spend fewer days in hospital, and are no more likely to use drugs or alcohol than in treatment first programs. Housing first appears to be the most effective model for breaking the cycle of Aboriginal homelessness.

### Call to action: overcoming indigenous homelessness

Addressing Aboriginal homelessness requires Aboriginal leadership in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. AHMA is in the best position to provide leadership in Canada, as a province-wide, independent Aboriginal organization. AHMA has a proven track record of developing proposals with other organizations that meet government requirements for funding, while addressing Aboriginal needs and goals. AHMA can also allocate government funding to address homelessness; just as we manage subsidy payments for Aboriginal social housing in BC.

AHMA has examined existing research on homelessness in Canada, which reveals:

- Homelessness programs designed, delivered and governed by Aboriginal people have better outcomes.
- Better data is needed on the extent, causes, and demographics of Aboriginal homelessness. The findings should be used to develop an effective national Aboriginal homelessness strategy.

Addressing Aboriginal homelessness is a daunting task, will take time, and needs to:

- Involve all levels of government
- Engage stakeholders in developing programs: people living on the streets, chiefs and councils, elders, service providers and non-profit organizations
- Support evidence-based solutions and the research to develop evidence
- Gather information by building relationships in communities and participating in “talking circles”
- Develop a database identifying numbers and gaps in services

Culturally appropriate solutions to Aboriginal homelessness should support Aboriginal values and traditional practices, with a continuum of services that includes:

- Emergency shelter services
- Structured intake
- Client participation in service delivery
- Mental health, physical health, detox and dental services
- Affordable, supportive transitional and permanent housing
- Culturally appropriate staffing and training
- Peer, community and family supports
- Discharge planning at correctional institutions

## The Roots of Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada

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- Education, skills development, employment and income support services
- Transportation for accessing employment and services

The lessons learned from research in Canada have relevance for indigenous people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness in all three countries.

AHMA will continue to work with all levels of government in Canada to ensure programming addresses Aboriginal homelessness. For more information, contact us at:

*Aboriginal Housing Management Association*  
Suite 605 - 100 Park Royal  
West Vancouver, B.C.  
V7T 1A2

Email: [reception@ahma-bc.org](mailto:reception@ahma-bc.org)

Phone: 1-604-921-2462

**[www.ahma-bc.org](http://www.ahma-bc.org)**