

The Indigenous Homelessness Crisis in Canada

Analyzing the Government of Canada's current Indigenous homelessness strategy

By Celine Copeland

Today, “[one] in 15 Aboriginal people in urban centres experience homelessness, compared to [one] in 128 for the general population” (Patrick, 2014, p. 22). The term Indigenous encompasses Metis, First Nations and Inuit (Kidd, Thistle, Beaulieu, O’Grady, & Gaetz, 2018, p. 2). According to Stewart (2007), the Canadian Government currently has “comprehensive national policies aimed at ending homelessness,” but these policies were not created with the intention of helping end Indigenous homelessness (as cited in Belanger, Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012, p. 13). I argue that Indigenous homelessness is one of the biggest issues facing Canadians today due to the lack of a clear strategy for Indigenous homelessness from the Government of Canada. I examine in this essay the factors that have led to Indigenous homelessness. Finally, through a comparison between international, national, and municipal homelessness in New Zealand, Canada and Calgary I identify recommendations for the Government of Canada.

Canada has a long history of mistreatment of Indigenous people, including past and present disagreements. The housing of Indigenous people has not been a priority for the Government of Canada since the establishment of “colonial desires” such as residential schools and reserves (Belanger, Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012, p. 15). According to Statistics Canada (2017), “There are approximately 1.6 million Indigenous people in Canada, accounting for 4.9 [per cent] of the total population” (as cited in Kidd et al., 2018, p. 2).

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

Thistle (2017) emphasizes the importance of understanding what Indigenous homelessness is:

Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of indigenous worldviews. These include: individuals, families, and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities. (p. 6)

Review of the Literature

This review of the literature focuses on the current context of Indigenous homelessness and colonial factors that have led to Indigenous homelessness in Canada. A number of authors have recognized “intergenerational trauma” due to colonization as a main causal factor of Indigenous homelessness (Christensen, 2016, p. 19-20). Intergenerational trauma is the historical events that cause deep pain in one’s life and continue to affect generations. The Government of Canada began assimilation in the 1800s with “the residential school system, where Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in schools where abuse and illness were rampant” (Christensen, 2016, p. 16; Kidd et. al, p. 2). This historical moment in particular “caused a deep cultural destabilization, destroyed institutions responsible for the socialization of Indigenous peoples, and has had the effect of traumatizing generations of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit” (Kidd et. al, 2018, p. 2). As a result, intergenerational trauma has increased cases of violence, alcoholism and mental illness leading to a higher homeless population (Christensen, 2016, p. 20).

The 1960s Sixties Scoop is when the government “remov[ed] Indigenous children from their families for the explicit purpose of cultural assimilation” (Christensen, 2016, p. 17; Kidd et,

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

al, 2018, p. 2). Once adopted by families who were not Indigenous or placed in the child welfare system, they were forced to leave their Indigenous culture behind (Christensen, 2016, p. 16). Due to the past usage of the child welfare system, adults today are “experiencing cultural, communal, and spiritual forms of homelessness” (Kidd et. al, 2018, p. 7). Intergenerational trauma and the welfare system have led to structural inequality for Canadian Indigenous Peoples. The “structural inequality,” is clear in the number of Indigenous Peoples in jail, the number of children in the “welfare system,” “the high rates of core housing need and poverty in Indigenous households both on-and off-reserve” (Christensen, 2016, p. 20). Due to a history of mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples, currently, there is a “chronic housing need and widespread issues with water quality and sanitation” (Christensen, 2016, p. 16).

International Indigenous Homelessness: New Zealand versus Canada

Canada and New Zealand have several similarities in how they engage in Indigenous homelessness. Both countries are Commonwealth countries, meaning they are under British reign. Similar to Canada, the Indigenous population in New Zealand, Maori, represent a large part of New Zealand’s homeless population (Groot & Peters, 2016, p. 323). New Zealand is an island country located “in the southwestern Pacific Ocean” (Groot & Peters, 2016, p. 323). According to Statistics New Zealand (2013), “Maori comprise 14.6 percent of the population of New Zealand” (as cited in Groot & Peters, 2016, p. 324).

In Canada, the government began to have more authority over Indigenous Peoples after the introduction of the “Indian Act” and the “British North America Act” in 1867 (Kidd et. al, 2018, p. 2). The implementation of these acts led to the loss of tradition, loss of land rights and the “creation of the reserve system,” which encouraged Indigenous Peoples to “migrat[e] to

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

urban centers over time” (Kidd et al., 2018, p. 2). Structural inequality in New Zealand stems from the introduction of the “Treaty of Waitangi” in 1840, which led to “British concepts of title and ownership, and the resulting alienation from and the confiscation of land from Maori” (Groot & Peters, 2016, p. 324). Due to the severe loss of culture for both Indigenous Peoples in Canada and New Zealand, intergenerational trauma exists.

Currently, Maori people feel excluded from the decision-making process (p. 327). Groot and Peters (2016) argue that “there is no coordinated response to homelessness or nationally funded program of research and action in New Zealand” (p. 327) This is exemplified in the New Zealand Government where “[n]o single government department has a statutory responsibility for homeless people or for coordinating services” (Groot & Peters, 2016, p. 327). In contrast, Canada has a Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations that focuses on Indigenous issues such as homelessness. However, this cannot be a solution as demonstrated by the overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples who are homeless. Despite having departments focused on Indigenous issues, Indigenous homelessness remains a crisis in Canada.

In November 2018 Canada announced that as part of its new homelessness strategy “Reaching Home” the government would increase the amount of funding for Indigenous organizations who serve homeless people (Craggs, 2018). However, an important question to ask with a plan centered around increasing funding is will the money go to creating the right cultural services to end Indigenous homelessness? Similarly, in May 2018 New Zealand also announced the goal of “hous[ing] [the] country’s entire homeless population,” but the plans did not mention a targeted strategy to help the Maori people (CBC Radio, 2018). Canada is ahead when it comes to Indigenous homelessness and New Zealand could learn from Canada in several aspects.

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

Local Indigenous Homelessness: Calgary, Alta.

According to TRC (2014), “With twenty-five residential schools in the province, Alberta had the highest number of residential schools in the country” (as cited in Thurston, Turner, & Bird, 2016, p. 153). On a municipal level, it is important to acknowledge what actions cities are making to improve the lives of Indigenous Peoples. Thurston, Turner and Bird (2016) identify that “[i]n the western provinces” there is not enough Indigenous staff running programs that assist both “men and women exit homelessness” (p. 155). The government must recognize that Indigenous homelessness is unlike general homelessness; Indigenous people require diverse programs unique to their own cultures and experiences.

According to the Calgary Homeless Foundation (2016), three per cent of the Calgary population is Indigenous and 20 per cent of that population are homeless (as cited in Inn from the Cold, 2018, p. 1). In 2012 the Aboriginal Standing Committee on housing and homelessness put in place a “Plan To End Aboriginal Homelessness In Calgary” (ASCHH, 2012). After the implementation of this plan, organizations who serve homeless people in Calgary see the value in providing Indigenous homelessness programs (ASCHH, 2012, pp. 7-8). Calgary has a homelessness strategy that focuses on Indigenous Peoples, but the Government of Canada does not. Especially in a time of reconciliation, this should be a priority for the government.

For example, an Indigenous leader leads The Calgary Homeless Foundation and encourages creating strong Indigenous partnerships in the community (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2018, p. 22). This is exemplified through “meet[ing] with indigenous elders and leaders to seek their wisdom and support on our journey towards truth and reconciliation” (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2018, p. 22). When focusing on cities in Canada, there is

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

information about helping end homelessness for Indigenous Peoples but nationally there is a lack of clear strategy from the Liberal Government in how to reduce the number of homeless Indigenous Peoples.

Analysis and Discussion: Recommendations

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The Truth Reconciliation Commission (TRC) began in 2008 when Stephen Harper's Conservative government apologized for the residential schools (Cochrane, Blidooock, & Dyck, 2017, p. 85). A gap in research exists regarding the impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada on Indigenous homelessness. In 2015, the TRC released a report with 94 calls to action or recommendations for the Government of Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). These calls to action "urg[e] all levels of government — federal, provincial, territorial and aboriginal — to work together to change policies and programs in a concerted effort to repair the harm caused by residential schools and move forward with reconciliation" (CBC News, 2015).

Child welfare is identified as a significant issue within the call to actions, but there is not a call to action that relates specifically to Indigenous homelessness, which is a cause for concern (Inn from the Cold, 2018, p. 2; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). For example, the calls to action address intergenerational trauma and structural inequality, but do not

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

discuss the importance of increasing the amount of housing for Indigenous Peoples. Recently on May 30, 2018, Bill C-262 passed as “An Act to ensure the laws of Canada are in harmony with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples” (Bill C-262, 2016). The current homelessness policies require revision to align with Bill C-262. The Government of Canada should encourage municipalities to incorporate the following recommendations in their homelessness services.

Recommendations

Indigenous Peoples make up a large part of Canada’s homeless population and the current programs in place at the federal level “are inadequate to address the housing and homeless issues identified, and successful approaches such as the Housing First model have ... been largely overlooked” (Belanger, Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012, p. 4). It is recommended that more research is conducted about the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples in the housing market and create “policies” that help people move from reserves to urban cities (Belanger, Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012, p. 4). Shier et al. (2015) stress, “Greater effort needs to be made at a public policy and programmatic level that aims to address this situation of Indigenous people being over-represented within Canada’s precariously housed population” (p. 69).

The first recommendation for the Government of Canada is to increase “culturally responsive services ... [that] accommodate service to a client’s cultural context, values and needs” (Mccallum & Isaac, 2011, p. 22). Many of the shelters that currently help homeless people in Canada “are coordinated through faith-based organizations” (Mccallum & Isaac, 2011, p. 21). As a result, it could be difficult for an Indigenous person to seek help because “Christian churches have also played powerfully negative roles as agents of colonization and assimilation in

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

the history of Aboriginal peoples” (Mccallum & Isaac, 2011, p. 21). Canadian homeless shelters must provide cultural responses, which means hiring more Indigenous Peoples who better understand what Indigenous Peoples experience every day (Mccallum & Isaac, 2011, p. 31; ASCHH, 2012, p. 7; Oelke, Thurston, Turner, 2016, p. 9).

Additionally, introducing “language programs” and “culturally specific shelters” will decrease homelessness (Kidd et al., 2018, p. 7). A step that is missed before considering implementing the programs is education and the “cultural training” that must occur to equip staff with the necessary skills and support to help homeless Indigenous individuals (Oelke, Thurston, Turner, 2016, p. 6). For example, the Inn from the Cold, a Calgary non-profit organization partners with the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary to help “Indigenous families and their children ... [with] reconnection to traditional cultural practices that is often lost in an urban setting” (Inn from the Cold, 2018, p. 3).

Programs that help one reconnect with their culture “include[e] regular access to Elders, and participation in ceremonies, recreation and sweat lodge ceremonies” (ASCHH, 2012, p. 28). Multiple staff members are Indigenous, including and “striv[e] to provide a culturally safe approach to addressing trauma within the shelter setting” (Inn from the Cold, 2018, p. 3). If Canada encourages other shelters to offer programs like the ones at Inn from the Cold there is a greater possibility that intergenerational trauma and homelessness will come to an end (Inn from the Cold, 2018, p. 4).

The second recommendation for the Government of Canada is “to create a national housing policy with a primary aim of increasing the amount of affordable housing” (Shier et al., 2015, pp. 69-70). It is evident that there is a critical need for “a national non-reserve housing strategy,” but it is difficult to implement due to the apathy that exists from non-Indigenous

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

people (Belanger, Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012, p. 36). The “conditions” regarding where urban Indigenous Peoples live is deplorable and “negatively impacts individual and collective socio-economic outcomes” (Belanger, Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012, p. 8). The Conservative Party of Canada believe that the Liberal’s current homelessness strategy should focus more on the Housing First model “if the government wants to meet its target of a 50 [per cent] reduction of chronic homelessness by 2027-28” (Conservative Party of Canada, 2018, para. 6). Integrating the Housing First model with a “therapeutic” approach allows homeless Indigenous Peoples to maintain their culture and traditions while having access to a home and “social integration” resources (Alaazi, Masuda, Evans, & Distasio, 2015, p. 32).

Conclusion

Through examining the Government of Canada’s current strategy to end Indigenous homelessness it is evident that the plans are vague and there is no clear vision. Now that Canada has addressed the issues of colonization and has begun the process of reconciliation it is necessary that the government takes the next steps in ensuring that all Indigenous Peoples have the equal opportunity and ability to exit homelessness. By comparing the situation of homelessness in the international context of New Zealand, it is apparent that Canada is not alone in having a large Indigenous homeless population. In contrast, at a municipal level, Calgary showcases the ability and value of having Indigenous centered programming at shelters. Most importantly, it is recommended that the Government of Canada establish a policy to addresses the need for more Indigenous oriented homeless shelters. Lastly, the Housing First model could greatly reduce the number of Indigenous Peoples on the street while providing an opportunity for

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

reintegration into society. The Indigenous homelessness crisis is a concern for all Canadians and is a part of the Government of Canada's road to reconciliation.

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

References

Aboriginal Standing Committee on housing and homelessness (ASCHH). (2012). *Plan to end*

Aboriginal homelessness in Calgary. Retrieved from I Heart Home:

<https://www.ihearthomeyc.com/aboriginal-plan/>

Alaazi, D., Masuda, J., Evans, J., & Distasio, J. (2015). Therapeutic landscapes of home:

Exploring Indigenous peoples' experiences of a Housing First intervention in

Winnipeg. *Social Science & Medicine*, 147(C), 30–37.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.10.057>

Belanger, Y., Weasel Head, G., & Awosoga, O. (2012). *Assessing Urban Aboriginal Housing*

and Homelessness in Canada. Ottawa, Ontario: Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network.

Retrieved from <https://www.deslibris.ca/ID/245362>

Bill C-262: An Act to ensure that the laws of Canada are in harmony with the United

Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. (2016). 1st Reading April 21,

2016, 42nd Parliament, 1st session. Retrieved from the Parliament of Canada website:

<http://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/bill/C-262/first-reading>

Calgary Homeless Foundation. (2018). *Two Decades of Time & Community Impact*. Retrieved

from Calgary Homeless Foundation:

http://calgaryhomeless.com/content/uploads/2018_07_23_CHF_AnnualReport_WEB.pdf

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

CBC News. (2015, Dec. 14). Truth and Reconciliation offers 94 ‘calls to action.’ Retrieved December 6, 2018 from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/truth-and-reconciliation-94-calls-to-action-1.3362258>

CBC Radio (2018, May 7). New Zealand to house country’s entire homeless population before winter hits next month. Retrieved December 6, 2018 from <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-friday-edition-1.4648602/new-zealand-to-house-country-s-entire-homeless-population-before-winter-hits-next-month-1.4649023>

Christensen, J. (2016). Indigenous Homelessness: Canadian Context. *Indigenous homelessness: perspectives from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand*. (pp. 15-23). Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press.

Cochrane, C., Blidooock, K., & Dyck, R. (2017). *Canadian politics: Critical approaches*. (8th ed.). Toronto: Nelson.

Conservative Party of Canada. (2018, June 11). Conservatives concerned for Housing First program. Retrieved December 6, 2018 from <https://media.conservative.ca/en/statements/conservatives-concerned-for-housing-first-program>

Craggs, S. (2018, Nov. 5). Indigenous agencies to get ‘transformative’ amount of cash to help homeless. Retrieved December 5, 2018 from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/indigenous-homelessness-1.4892394>

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

Groot, S. & Peters, E. J. (2016). Indigenous Homelessness: New Zealand Context. *Indigenous homelessness: perspectives from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (pp. 323-328).
Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press.

Inn from The Cold. (2018 August). *The Role of Reconciliation in Ending Child and Family Homelessness*. Retrieved from <https://innfromthecold.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/INNformation-Report-Focus-on-Indigenous-Homelessness-email.pdf>

Kidd, S., Thistle, J., Beaulieu, T., O'Grady, B., & Gaetz, S. (2018). A national study of Indigenous youth homelessness in Canada. *Public Health*, 1-9.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2018.06.012>

McCallum, K., & Isaac, D. (2011). *Feeling home: Culturally responsive approaches to Aboriginal homelessness*. Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia.
Retrieved from: <https://www.sparc.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/feeling-home-final-report.pdf>

Oelke, N. D., Thurston, W. E., & Turner, D. (2016). Aboriginal homelessness: a framework for best practice in the context of structural violence. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 7(2), 5.

Patrick, C. (2014). *Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada: A Literature Review*. Homeless Hub.
Retrieved from <http://deslibris.ca/ID/241577>

INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA
AUTHOR: CELINE COPELAND

Shier, M.L., Graham, J.R., Fukuda, E., & Turner, A. (2015). Risk and protective factors of precarious housing among Indigenous people living in urban centres in Alberta, Canada, *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, 72/73, pp. 65-94.

Thurston, E. W, Turner, D., & Bird, C. (2016). Community-Engaged Scholarship: A Path to New Solutions for Old Problems in Indigenous Homelessness. *Indigenous homelessness: perspectives from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand*. (pp. 150-160). Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*. Winnipeg, MB.