

Housing and Homelessness Sector: First Nations Homelessness Action Plan

Summary of Research and Recommendations

In order to advance the mandate established by Resolution 79/2019 to conduct research and engagement to inform the development of a national First Nations Homelessness Action Plan, the AFN commissioned three research projects on First Nations homelessness, including a literature review, environmental scan, and systems map of existing programs and services across Canada, to better understand the impact of homelessness on First Nations and identify opportunities for improved service delivery and coordination to meet the needs of First Nations people experiencing homelessness.

The following summary provides an overview of the conclusions and recommendations from all three research reports.

FIRST NATIONS HOMELESSNESS

First Nations people are overrepresented among the homeless population across Canada. The vast majority of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness are First Nations. On any given night in Canada, it is estimated that between 25,000 to 35,000 people are experiencing homelessness¹, at least 9,191 of whom are estimated to be First Nations people. First Nations people are over-represented among the homeless population, particularly in the Prairies, where 68.0% of shelter users are Indigenous compared to 10.4% of the total population.

Although a definition of homelessness specific to First Nations people does not exist, Indigenous homelessness can be understood as a consequence of colonial practices that contributed to the fracturing of communities, kinship, and traditional governance systems, and that enabled laws that dispossessed First Nations people of their lands, rights, ways of life, and spiritual and cultural practices. Colonization and ongoing marginalization of First Nations people are widely recognized as the primary causes of First Nations homelessness. While data is not available on the number of youth that have experience with the child welfare system who become homeless, in Vancouver, it has been estimated that **50% of the 700 Indigenous youth that age out of foster care each year will end up on the streets** as part of the city's homeless population

There is limited data on the extent of First Nations homelessness, particularly related to the extent of First Nations people experiencing hidden homelessness, homelessness on-reserve, and First Nations-specific data on people experiencing homelessness off-reserve.

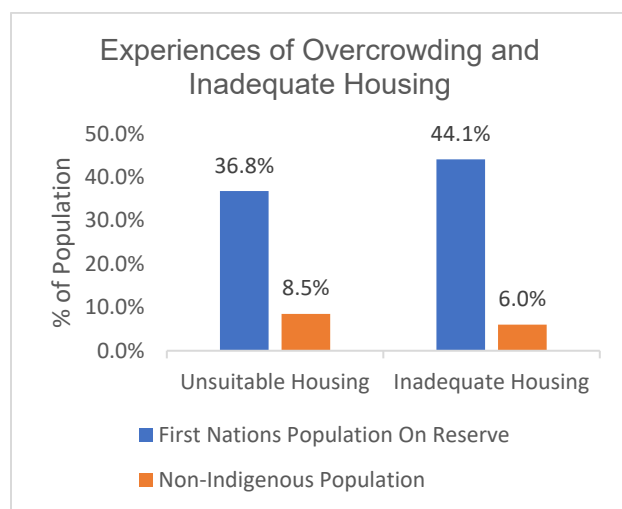
The Impact of the First Nations Housing Crisis

¹ ESDC, 2019, Highlights: Preliminary Results from the Second Nationally Coordinated Point-in-Time Count of Homelessness in Canadian Communities.

The long-standing housing crisis and conditions of inadequate housing in First Nations result in high rates of “hidden homelessness” in communities. Hidden homelessness, which includes overcrowding, inadequate housing, and insecure housing (e.g., couch surfing) accounts for a significant portion of homelessness among First Nations people. In addition to receiving

temporary housing from a family member or friend, 8.8% of First Nations adults on reserve have been visibly homeless at least once.²

First Nation housing systems often cannot meet members’ needs due to insufficient capacity in infrastructure and social services. When surveyed, First Nations reported a lack of available housing on reserve that resulted in overcrowded homes, 2 to 10+ years-long waitlists for housing, and extensive waitlists for housing repairs and maintenance. Couch surfing and hidden homelessness on reserve were prevalent in all First Nations, and one First Nation also reported a high rate of visible homelessness (i.e., tent cities) on-reserve.



Environmental Scan Related to First Nations, AFN 2021

Unsuitable housing refers to housing that is not suitable for the size of the household and contributes to overcrowding.

Inadequate housing is impacted by substandard construction, lack of electricity and plumbing, structural deficiencies, mould contamination, overcrowding, and lack of significant repairs. The most common reason for inadequate housing on reserve is mould infestation.

On-reserve housing systems in their current state are designed to push members out, not bring them in, resulting in a strong probability that **many First Nations members will not be able to return home.**

It is common for a First Nation to be only able to accommodate between 30% to 60% of their actual on-reserve population. When considering the off-reserve population, the disproportionately limited housing available relative to the number of First Nation members in need of housing is a large gap to fill. **In some cases, Nations only have housing for 10% or less of their total population.**

Urban First Nations Homelessness

The significant lack of services in First Nations is a main contributor to the high rates of migration by First Nations people from their communities to urban centers. However, research shows that if First Nations people were provided with safe, secure housing, communities with

² First Nations Labour and Employment Development (FNLED) 2019

essential social and health services, and opportunities for upward mobility, migration would be significantly reduced.

Because the First Nations population off-reserve is more mobile than the non-Indigenous population, they may be more likely to face the impacts of tight, high-cost rental markets.³ In

2016, 21.1% of First Nations people off reserve were in core housing need compared to 12.4% of the non-Indigenous population.⁴

Available data from homelessness enumerations demonstrate that First Nations people accounted for 28% of the homeless population in 44 communities that reported on the number of First Nations people experiencing homelessness, while they represented only 2.0% of the population in these communities on average. On any given night, 1 in 38 of the First Nations population is experiencing homelessness compared to 1 in 900 of the non-Indigenous population, which highlights the overrepresentation of First Nations people among those experiencing homelessness. **23 times as many First Nations people experience homelessness compared to non-Indigenous people.**

First Nations shelter users have an average length of stay of 10 days.⁵ On average, First Nations shelter users experience a higher rate of episodic homelessness⁶ and have a higher number of shelter stays per year than non-Indigenous shelter users.⁷ They are also 19.0% less likely than non-Indigenous shelter users to exit a shelter because they found housing, indicating barriers to finding housing.⁸ In 2016, nearly 1 in 5 emergency shelter users (17.1%) identified as First Nations.

Access to Supports and Services

Although many First Nations offer some form of housing support, it is typically delivered through services such as housing maintenance, financial assistance, and help towards obtaining on-reserve housing. Many First Nations lack core and essential services or do not have the capacity to offer services simultaneously.

First Nations report providing no or highly limited support to their members off-reserve. The most common resources offered off reserve are funding-related services such as emergency medical funds, funding towards education/training, and general allowances for students. On-reserve service providers are likely to refer off-reserve band members to services and resources in their local jurisdiction rather than provide them directly from the First Nation.

³ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2019, Market Predictors of Homelessness

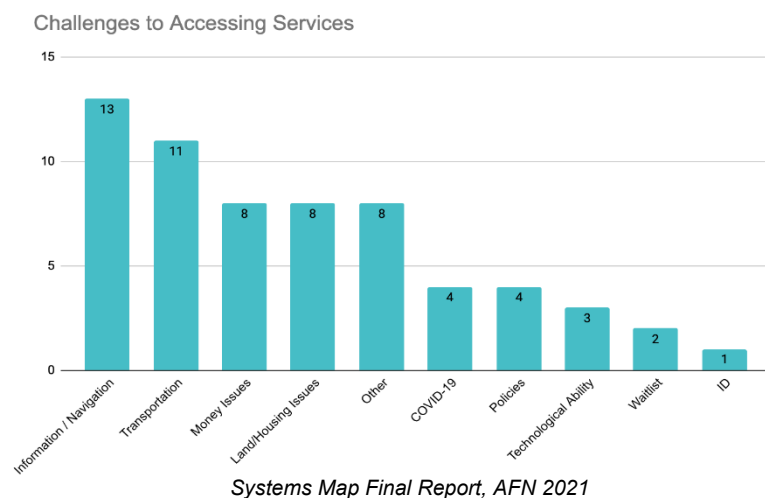
⁴ A household is said to be in 'core housing need' if its housing falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability or suitability standards and it would have to spend 30% or more of its total before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable (meets all three housing standards).

⁵ ESDC, 2019, Memorandum for the Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development Canada, Study of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada

⁶ Episodic homelessness is defined as 3 or more episodes of homelessness during the year.

⁷ ESDC, 2019, Memorandum for the Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development Canada, Study of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada

⁸ Ibid.



First Nations individuals face several barriers to service access. A significant barrier identified during AFN's research is related to information and social service navigation. Although individuals are most likely to look for information online, through band administration, and through posters/newsletters, they report lacking awareness of services offered by their First Nation that are available and appropriate for

their needs. Another recurrent barrier encountered by individuals accessing services on or off-reserve is a lack of convenient public transportation across distances. Experiences of racism and discrimination also represent a major barrier to service access.

The limited funding available is a concern for First Nations addressing homelessness within their communities. Of the 10 national housing programs identified by AFN research to provide support for First Nations homelessness reduction, 4 provide dedicated funding for Indigenous homelessness and only 1 provides support to shelters both on- and off-reserve. The vast majority of provincial homelessness programs are only available off-reserve.

Most federal programs that provide support for First Nations people experiencing homelessness off-reserve do so through funds that address Indigenous homelessness more broadly. Funding for Indigenous homelessness is low compared to the proportion of the homeless population and population with unmet housing needs who are Indigenous. There are regional disparities in the availability of funding to address homelessness across the country. Provincial programs with supports dedicated to Indigenous homelessness were identified in just two provinces: British Columbia and Ontario.

AFN's research identified a total of 548 Indigenous-serving housing and homelessness services off reserve across Canada, comprised of 508 programs, 32 benefits, and 8 helplines.

The majority of off-reserve Indigenous-serving housing and homelessness services across Canada are non-Indigenous led, which may indicate services that cater to the general population or have a broader focus that includes serving people of Indigenous identity. Of all identified services, only 4% appeared to be First Nations-led.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy Development

- Increased funding programs delivered through governance structures that respect First Nations self-determination.
- A greater proportion of funding for First Nations homelessness to align with level of need.
- Provincial funding specifically targeted to address Indigenous homelessness
- Reduced restrictions to allow funding to be used both on- and off-reserve.
- Flexibility to adapt service models to meet local First Nations community needs
- Increased financial investments both on- and off-reserve for prevention services.
- Resources to support a national Point-in-Time homelessness count (PiT) to determine an accurate number of First Nations people experiencing homelessness.
- Convening funders to create an integrated funding strategy.

Service Delivery

- Make information on programs and services more easily accessible and transparent to members both on and off-reserve.
- Improve systems Planning and Integration to ensure coordination of support, referral, and access between on and off-reserve providers.
- Strengthen relationships between urban centres and First Nations to improve comfort levels to refer First Nation members to off-reserve programs and services
- Acknowledge the First Nation' jurisdiction to address and respond to their members' needs
- Allow First Nations leaders, knowledge keepers, and experts equal leadership, at minimum, in the process of co-creating approaches to addressing First Nations homelessness.
- Connect cultural teachings and practices to service delivery.

Research

- Create and implement a National Data Framework for Assessing First Nations Homelessness that aligns with First Nations Principles of OCAP®.
- Research should be conducted by First Nations organizations or in partnership with First Nations organizations to ensure it reflects the interests and concerns of First Nations.
- Governments and mainstream organizations should increase their sharing of data with First Nations organizations, including existing research conducted by ESDC such as its Indigenous Homelessness Study and its analysis of the 2018 national Point-in-Time Count.
- Research findings should report on First Nations specifically, where possible, as opposed to aggregating the findings under Indigenous peoples more broadly.
- While a broad-based definition of Indigenous homelessness exists, a definition of First Nations homelessness is necessary for a distinctions-based approach.
- Additional research on the extent of First Nations people experiencing hidden homelessness and homelessness on reserve should be undertaken.
- Determine the First Nations housing supply per on-reserve capita and per total capita.
- Seek resources to conduct a national Point-in-Time Count to ascertain an accurate number of First Nations people experiencing homelessness on reserve.