

SERIES:

HEALTH AND HOUSING REALITIES FOR INUIT

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Homelessness and Housing Realities for Inuit Background and Glossary

Materials Prepared for the
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Inuit Tuttarvingat



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BACKGROUND FOR DISCUSSION

Housing shortages and poor quality housing are an urgent public health priority for all Inuit regions in Canada. Insufficient housing can lead to overcrowding, deficient sanitation and ventilation, the spread of infectious diseases, psychosocial stresses, and violence. Among Inuit, housing problems have been associated with low achievement levels in schools, spousal abuse, respiratory tract infections among infants, depression, and substance abuse.

In Iqaluit alone, 150 women, many with children, are without a place to call home, estimates the latest study by the Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council. Two other reports on women and homelessness draw a similar dire situation for the three territories.

As a group, Inuit suffer the worst overcrowding in Canada. It is estimated that 53 per cent of Inuit households are overcrowded, and it is not uncommon for seven or more people to inhabit a single household. Fifteen per cent of Nunavut's population is on waiting lists for public housing. In 2004, ITK estimated that 3,300 houses are needed to address the current housing shortage in Nunavut, and an additional 250 units per year would be required thereafter. A 2003 Housing Needs Survey in Newfoundland and Labrador found that 44 per cent of Inuit households were in 'core need', meaning that they were overcrowded, in need of repair, or had rents exceeding 30 per cent of the household income.

From the report issued by Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) "Homeless in the Territorial North: State and Availability of the Knowledge" (2006) we learn that the key characteristics and issues are found in the following five areas:

Demographic profile:

- There is no real knowledge about the number of homeless in the territorial north.
- It is a highly mobile population with very little data about the migration patterns of the homeless.
- Urbanization is very common in the territories. In Nunavut, migration into Iqaluit is often thought of as a cause of many homelessness-related problems.

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Geography and Climate:

- Permafrost and sea-ice make transportation and engineering more difficult in the Arctic and both influence the schedule of building construction.
- The construction season is very short. To extend the building season, most materials delivered in the summer are built in a heated structure that can be worked on during the winter.
- There is very limited road connection between communities and building roads is extremely costly.
- Delivery by ship is the main way of delivering goods, particularly large and heavy ones, and is costly.
- Heating and insulation costs are high because of cold climate.
- High fuel costs have a direct impact on affordability of housing (heating oil and diesel for electricity generation).

Socio-economic:

- The territories have weak economic positions and are dependent on federal transfers.
- High unemployment rates prevail (with the exception of the Yukon, where the employment situation is much better than NWT and Nunavut).
- There are high rates of social problems, cycles of rapid development and clashing of cultures.
- Service infrastructure is seriously deficient in fundamental ways.

Supply and Condition of Housing:

- The need for public housing is much greater than the need for private housing.
- Reliance on housing assistance is excessive.
- Housing programs play an important role in the prevention of homelessness and also getting the homeless back into housing.

Programs, Services, and Facilities:

- Northern emergency shelters tend to have major issues regarding under funding, management trouble, and financial collapses and are sometimes overwhelmed by applicants seeking accommodation.

The issue of “hidden homelessness” is an example of the scope of homelessness in the north that the south has not been able to reconcile with. The south has more of an “absolute homelessness” problem, meaning that the homeless are visible on the streets and in the communities, whereas the “hidden homeless” in the north are more difficult to spot and often survive by going from home to home for a night or two, either with family, friends, or families that bring them in from the harsh conditions.

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The south has many statistics that are available regarding homelessness that enables better decisions to be made when it comes to the amount of funding and where funding should be provided and to what programs the funding should go to. In the north there is very limited data about the homeless and that makes it difficult for southern funding to be put into the most effective places.

Links between health and homelessness and health and overcrowding have been documented. The health problems in Inuit communities are also documented and of great concern. The suicide rate of Inuit male youth is more than 40 times the Canadian rate. Violence, substance abuse and incarceration rates in Inuit communities are high. Homelessness and the necessity for dependence on others in overcrowded conditions may well contribute to the depression, anger and hopelessness that underlie such behaviors; financial and emotional stresses may also increase for those who provide shelter. Anecdotal reports indicate that women and children may be at higher risk of sexual and physical abuse in unsafe temporary accommodations.

Employment and education rates, which are known to be important socioeconomic determinants of health, are low. The hidden homeless, including families with children, often move from house to house. Lack of stable housing makes it more difficult to obtain stable employment or to study for, access, or stay in educational programs. Educated Inuit are most likely to attain and retain jobs in the Arctic. However, in order to complete the education necessary for these positions, individuals must have healthy foods and environments in which to live, study, sleep and remain both physically and psychologically healthy. Housing or lack thereof, plays an integral role in this cycle. Until there is sufficient numbers of houses to sustain the Inuit population, it will be difficult to ensure that youth or their parents are able to attain the educational objectives that are needed in order to obtain the employment that will then allow them to afford their own homes.

GLOSSARY

Terms for Homelessness

“It is important to remember that the term “homelessness” can refer to various situations — people living with friends, women staying for a short period in shelters for abused women, and prisoners are all sometimes put into this category. It is necessary, therefore, to be aware that, unless they are seen in context, the research findings are meaningless.”¹

Homelessness – “A ‘homeless’ person is not only someone without a domicile who lives on the street or in a shelter, but can equally be someone without access to shelter meeting the basic criteria considered essential for health and human and social development. These criteria would include secure occupancy, protection against bad weather, and personal security, as well as access to sanitary facilities and potable water, education, work, and health services. The right to a home must be seen as a basic humanitarian principle, recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”ⁱ (Definition by the United Nations)

Absolute homelessness – Refers to those without any physical shelter. This would include those who are living outside, in parks or on the beach, in doorways, in parked vehicles, or parking garages, for example, as well as those in emergency shelters or in transition houses or women fleeing abuse.ⁱⁱ

Chronically homeless – This group includes “people who live on the periphery of society and who often face problems of drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Cyclically homeless – This group includes “individuals who have lost their dwelling as a result of some change in their situation, such as loss of a job, a move, a prison term or a hospital stay. Those who must from time to time use safe-houses or soup kitchens include women who are victims of family violence,

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runaway youths, and persons who are unemployed or recently released from a detention centre or psychiatric institution.”^{iv}

Hidden homelessness – applies to those living in overcrowded and/or inadequate conditions.

Relative homelessness – “Applies to people whose housing fails in some way to meet basic standards. It might be too small, in very poor repair, cost an unsustainable proportion of their income, or they might be "borrowing" housing from others by staying on friends' couches or otherwise doubling up.”^v

Temporarily homeless – This group includes “those who are without accommodation for a relatively short period. Likely to be included in this category are persons who lose their home as a result of a disaster (fire, flood, war) and those whose economic and personal situation is altered by, for example, separation or loss of job. Some researchers do not consider this group as being truly homeless and exclude them from their studies.”^{vi}

Terms for Housing

Housing – CMHC defines housing as “Residential accommodation and facilities, common areas and services used directly with the residential accommodation. Housing does not include commercial or institutional premises, social or recreational services, and services or facilities related to mental or physical health care, education, corrections, food services, social support or public recreation;”^{vii}

Affordable housing – “The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation defines ‘affordable housing’ as housing that costs no more than 30% of your income. People who spend more than 50% of their income on housing are at high risk of homelessness.”^{viii}

Half-way house is a “rehabilitation facility for individuals, such as mental patients or substance abusers, who no longer require the complete facilities of a hospital or other institution but who are not yet prepared to return to their communities.”^{ix} Newly released inmates may also be included as potential users of half-way houses.

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Subsidized housing – Housing that requires some federal, provincial or local monetary subsidy so that it is affordable for low to moderate income families so that they don't spend a disproportionate share of their income (See "affordable housing" above). Most of these housing projects have deed restrictions designed to keep the price at affordable levels for a specified period of time.^x

Unsubsidized housing – "Housing that is priced (Owner housing) or has monthly-annual rent charges (Renter housing) at levels determined by the regional housing market without policy or regulatory intervention. Some of this housing may relatively inexpensive housing that allows low-and moderate-income families to afford without spending a disproportionate share of their income."^{xi}

ⁱ <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection-R/LoPBdP/modules/prb99-1-homelessness/definition-e.htm>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.richmond.ca/services/socialplan/housing/hlstrategy/definitions.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection-R/LoPBdP/modules/prb99-1-homelessness/definition-e.htm>

^{iv} <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection-R/LoPBdP/modules/prb99-1-homelessness/definition-e.htm>

^v http://www.hwcen.org/link/hasc/hnb_info.htm

^{vi} <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection-R/LoPBdP/modules/prb99-1-homelessness/definition-e.htm>

^{vii} http://www.bchousing.org/resources/News_Releases/CMHC_Agreement_Eng.pdf

^{viii} http://www.hwcen.org/link/hasc/hnb_info.htm

^{ix} <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/halfway+house>

^x http://www.co.ulster.ny.us/planning/house_strat_app8.pdf

^{xi} http://www.co.ulster.ny.us/planning/house_strat_app8.pdf



National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)
Organisation nationale de la santé autochtone (ONSA)
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