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# Assessing Urban Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness in Canada

Yale D. Belanger  
Associate Professor  
Native American Studies  
University of Lethbridge  
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Gabrielle Weasel Head  
Independent Researcher  
Calgary, Alberta

Olu Awosoga  
Assistant Professor  
Health Sciences  
University of Lethbridge  
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

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## **Terminology**

The term 'Aboriginal people' indicates any one of the three legally defined culture groups that form what is known as Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Métis, Inuit, and Indian) and who self-identify as such. The term First Nation is used here to denote a reserve community, or band. The term Indian, as used in legislation or policy, will also appear in discussions concerning such legislation or policy. The term Indigenous here does not represent a legal category. Rather, it is used to describe the descendants of groups in a territory at the time when other groups of different cultures or ethnic origin arrived there, groups that have almost preserved intact the customs and traditions of their ancestors similar to those characterized as Indigenous, and those that have been placed under a state structure which incorporates national, social, and cultural characteristics distinct from their own.

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## **Contact Information**

Dr. Yale D. Belanger  
Associate Professor  
Native American Studies  
University of Lethbridge  
4401 University Drive  
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada  
T1K 3M4  
403-382-7101 – work  
403-380-1855 – fax  
belayd@uleth.ca  
<http://uleth.academia.edu/YaleBelanger>

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## Executive Summary

This report sought to determine the current state of urban Aboriginal housing and how it can be improved. An up-to-date mapping of Aboriginal people's housing conditions in urban areas is provided. Nationally rates of urban Aboriginal homeownership and rental rates are lower than that of mainstream Canada. Urban Aboriginal homelessness is a substantial issue based on noticeably higher levels of Aboriginal representation amongst the national homeless population. It is evident that national policies are needed to specifically aid urban Aboriginal renters and homeowners, and to ameliorate urban Aboriginal homelessness. Home ownership helps reduce the gap between mainstream and Aboriginal rates of core housing need. However, Aboriginal renters are considerably worse off than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, and present higher rates of core housing need and overcrowding. Beyond affordability issues individual and community-driven resistance to Aboriginal housing initiatives and individual Aboriginal desires for permanent urban residency are evident. A cyclical process hindering urban Aboriginal renter and homeownership advancement is also apparent. Métis and Non-Status Indians are more likely to become homeowners than Status Indians and Inuit. Existing programs are inadequate to address the housing and homeless issues identified, and successful approaches such as the Housing First model have to this point been largely overlooked. We would suggest establishing proactive policies with the goal of facilitating individual transition into urban centres, while also exploring why discrimination and racism remains prevalent for urban Aboriginal renters and homeowners.

We recommend that the Canadian Government formally endorse the National Aboriginal Housing Association's call for a national non-reserve housing strategy. Establishing a national Housing and Homelessness Secretariat devoted to reserve and urban Aboriginal housing and homeless issues is also advocated. Additional research is required to determine why Métis and Non-Status Indians are more likely to become homeowners than Status Indians and Inuit. And a comprehensive national enumeration of Aboriginal homelessness is required. The nature of homelessness needs to be explored, as does our understanding of rural Aboriginal homeless rates and its impact on urban lifestyles. Consideration should be given to reinstating and increasing funding for social housing and mortgage subsidies under the Aboriginal off-reserve programs of the CMHC. Greater autonomy and flexibility must be granted to Aboriginal organizations delivering programs in rural areas, and to urban social housing corporations. There is a need to explore the socio-economic reasons of core housing need and to determine whether low labour market and educational outcomes are impeding urban Aboriginal homeownership. A national study exploring the impacts of NIMBY on rental opportunities, and the related influence over urban Aboriginal homeless rates, is required as is greater attention to creating proactive policies to assist with urban Aboriginal homeownership and improving rental opportunities, and to combat homelessness. Ottawa needs to consider providing rental subsidies as a cost-effective option. Finally, public education strategies need to be developed to demonstrate NIMBY's negative impact on urban Aboriginal rental opportunities, and how improved homeownership rates translate into lower public response costs for poverty programming.

## **1. Introduction**

The National Aboriginal Housing Association (NAHA) estimated in 2006 that 73.4% of Aboriginal households live off the reserve, up from 70.6% in 2001 (NAHA 2009, 6). That year the Canada Census concluded that 54% of the national Aboriginal population lived in cities (Environics Institute 2010, 24); and that this population is younger and growing more rapidly than the non-Aboriginal population due, in part, to high birth and fertility rates and urban migration from the surrounding reserves and between rural and urban communities (e.g., Environics Institute 2010). Also in 2006 the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) estimated that more than one-third of the national Aboriginal population lived in unsuitable, inadequate, or unaffordable housing compared to 18% of the non-Native population. Accepting the fact that adequate, affordable, and suitable housing contributes directly to improved health and well-being; they are directly linked to the ability to participate in the economy and general society; and that the associated employment and educational attainment levels are intimately linked to housing security, this study responds to the question, “What is happening right now?” in order to present a national level portrait of the current urban Aboriginal housing situation in Canada. In an effort to determine the state of urban Aboriginal housing and how it can be improved, we will produce an assessment of the people and place in the moment in order to provide:

- 1) An up-to-date mapping of Aboriginal people’s housing conditions in urban areas. Housing conditions is here intended to signify a continuum of housing conditions including (but limited to) owner-occupied, rented and social housing, to staying with friends (i.e., couch surfing, multi-generational and multifamily homes), and shelters;

2) The data needed for scholars to pursue additional research aimed at developing rigorous and refined predictive models of inquiry.

This report will proceed as follows. First, the extant literature about the urban Aboriginal experience will be explored followed by a discussion of both urban Aboriginal housing and homelessness trends. Canadian housing policy and where urban Aboriginal peoples fit into the overall bureaucratic/policy processes will then be elaborated followed by an analysis of Aboriginal Peoples Survey data to reveal the types of Aboriginal urban households (e.g., owner and private rented).<sup>1</sup> These data also inform our discussion on housing affordability, specifically the percentage of households presenting a shelter-to-income ratio (STIR) of 30% or higher. These categories were thoughtfully chosen due to their capacity to influence Aboriginal mobility, result in family instability, and lead to low youth educational outcomes and limited employment prospects. Finally, the extent of urban Aboriginal homelessness will be documented based on a review of the most up-to-date homeless counts undertaken in major urban centres across the country. These tend to be annual point-in-time municipal counts of homeless persons devised to help officials determine the estimated number of people who on the night of the count did not have “a permanent residence of which they could return” (Belanger 2011a, 1).

It must be noted that these and other similar measures are imperfect gauges of local homeless trends. For instance, it has been hypothesized that a full 80% of the homeless community remains invisible (e.g., couch surfing, intentionally living apart from mainstream populations) and thus not accessible to the census enumerators (Raising the Roof 2004). These methods underestimate the number of homeless people because they may not include all people sleeping on the street; and they rely heavily on known contact points that may or may not be

accessed by all homeless people. Where possible emergency shelter counts will be utilized to verify the homeless counts. Finally, there has been a long-standing debate concerning the integrity of the data utilized to capture these and similar trends, which we acknowledge. With that said, these are also among the most reliable indices available, and as such are utilized in the subsequent analysis.

## **2. Urban Aboriginal Peoples: The Policy Environment**

Place is a personal concept central to an individual's sense of identity. Canada's history is replete with tales of colonists pushing into indigenous territories only to claim homeland status, after which regional identities materialized in the settlements that would eventually develop into many of our modern cities (e.g., Mumford 1938). Borne of these municipal trends were new settler-informed norms that guided the emergent political class pursuing community building initiatives. Many leaders observed Aboriginal folks regularly visiting their communities in search of health care and economic opportunities, although they and their municipal brethren frequently consider allowing visible municipal Aboriginal participation to become an active aspect of their development plans. In response 'municipal-colonialism' materialized in many regions across Canada, which Stanger-Ross (2008) describes as the implementation of city-planning processes purposely designed to manage Aboriginal peoples in urban settings (also Belanger forthcoming 2012). Arguably many of the same attitudes that heretofore resulted in Aboriginal peoples' physical isolation on reserves continue to encourage contemporary urban Aboriginal exclusion. This is for Windsor and Mcvey (2005) extremely problematic, for they have concluded that both compelled relocation and voluntary relocation based on the need to escape damaging attitudes negatively impacts interpersonal relationships. Further, relocation has been shown to arrest

personal and collective identity development. Many urban Aboriginal people nationally have either overcome or learned to manage these disparate forces, and have in the process established unique municipal cultural spaces they call home. Yet ironically enough the already difficult task of community building is aggravated by the destabilizing nature of being unwelcomed in one's own lands (see Weasel Head 2011; *cf* Abele, Falvo & Hache 2010).

What most city histories frequently fail to recognize is Métis and Aboriginal municipal participation and their ability to adapt upon becoming immersed in the urban environment. As Anderson (2002, 20) notes, however, Aboriginal people “have created new and distinct communities while concomitantly creating new cultural norms, adapting, as we have always done, to the material circumstances around us.” Yet the non-Aboriginal majority still clings to the certainty that cities remain alien environments to Aboriginal peoples better suited to rural lifestyles, regardless of the at minimum three generations of Aboriginal urbanization and growing interaction between urban Aboriginal and municipal leaders (e.g., Belanger & Walker 2009, Malloy 2001; Nelles & Alcantara 2009). This perceived incommensurability in turn obliges limited municipal, provincial or federal consideration (Forsyth & Heine 2008; Peters 1996), leaving urban Aboriginal people, in particular Non-Status Indians, legislatively abandoned by Ottawa and thus obliged to forge ahead in what are bureaucratically and often socially hostile environments.

Consequently, cities are colonial environments that perpetuate binaries highlighting to residents who is an insider/outsider and citizen/other (*cf* Furniss 1999). As perpetual outsiders, popular beliefs equating urban Indians as displaced cultural curiosities are therefore validated (Francis 1992). Countering this stereotype is a growing literature highlighting urban Aboriginal adaptability and how meaningful urban space has become to many Aboriginal peoples' identities



(Awad 2002; Belanger *et al.* 2003). Peters (2005, 393) has argued that amongst urban Aboriginal peoples there exists “a sense of belonging, active household assistance networks, and the growing presence of self-governing institutions,” and that while Aboriginal people tend to be among the poorest urban residents there exists no conclusive evidence pointing to the fact that they are increasingly relegated to or ghettoized in particular neighbourhoods (Peters 2005, 2004). This challenges Richards (2001) earlier assertions concluding that Aboriginal peoples were more apt to live in poor neighbourhoods than non-Aboriginal individuals. Positive social reproduction is however dependent on more than intra-community support—it is reliant on equitable access to resources and the ability to participate in localized policy development (e.g., Belanger & Walker 2009; Prentice 2007; Sookraj *et al.* 2010), something that in most cases continues to elude urban Aboriginal peoples.

It must be noted that several studies have since identified urban Aboriginal ghettoization, or at the very least conditions that are suggestive of Aboriginal ghettoization in various cities across Canada (e.g., Andersen 2005; Belanger 2007; Cohen & Corrado 2004). This should not be surprising for several reasons. First, ethnic and social class (and more recently gender) have for the last four decades been considered among the key drivers of segregation, and this increases the possibility of socio-economically depressed Aboriginal émigrés becoming isolated on the basis of class and phenotype (e.g., Backhouse 2001, Darroch & Marston 1971, Hou & Balakrishan 1996, Jaccoud & Brassard 2003). Socio-economic depression is for example evident among women-led, single-parent Aboriginal households, which represent a large group among the poorly housed. Secondly, urban émigrés did and continue to seek out and live with family members, from which municipal Aboriginal neighbourhoods evolved. Perpetuating this process were émigrés living in multi-family and multi-generational homes and other immigrants from

surrounding reserve communities moving into recently vacated local rental units (Peters & Starchenko 2005; *cf* Driedger & Peters 1977). Third, these known Aboriginal neighbourhoods offer respite and temporary housing to a hyper-mobile group who ‘churn’, which, according to Norris, denotes regularized movement between the city and reserve (Norris & Clatworthy 2003). This increases the prospect of perpetuating cycles of ghettoization, something Peters (1996) anticipated in the 1990s. She also expressed her alarm at the prevailing academic tendency to categorize Aboriginal urbanization as a social problem, both in terms of urban migration’s drivers (i.e., better employment and education opportunities), and the perceived Aboriginal inability to adapt to urban living. Lastly, housing discrimination on the basis of culture and perceived economic standing is evident (e.g., Barsh 1997; Belanger 2007; CMHC 2003; Carter & Osborne 2009; Cohen & Corrado 2004).

The aforementioned Aboriginal hyper mobility, which can be defined as a combination of pushes and pulls resulting in frequent movement between the city and the reserve, between cities, and increasingly within municipalities, has recently attracted increased academic attention, even if it tends to conceptualize Aboriginal peoples as victims beset with numerous problems. For example, reserve-city-reserve churn has not abated despite proof of improved urban Aboriginal educational and income levels (Beavon & Cooke, 2003; Siggner & Costa 2005). Cooke and Belanger’s (2006) work in particular is useful for determining the ‘whys’ of hyper-mobility; specifically it encourages inquiries into the significance of cultural connections and economic opportunities, as well as the variety of ongoing connections between sending and receiving communities. However, as Guimond (2003) has warned, the intricacy of urban Aboriginal identity development and the related social affiliations—neither of which are permanent or automatically transmitted intergenerationally—complicates how we identify and comprehend

socio-economic characteristics and other demographic phenomena. Hyper-mobility's impact on homelessness also remains an untested hypothesis even if research has identified a correlation (southern Alberta for example) (Belanger 2007; Weasel Head 2011). There is therefore a need for studies detailing how hyper-mobility is influenced by or informs Aboriginal homelessness trends, how it impacts service delivery and programming, and its influence on an individual's ability to procure and maintain housing.

In spite of these obstacles an urban Aboriginal community has flourished in countless regions nationally. This has compelled academics to finally begin acknowledging Aboriginal urbanization as less embryonic in scope and rather something that has indeed occurred albeit constantly evolving. A desire for urban recognition and acceptance, or in certain cases the need to secure a degree of Aboriginal rights in urban settings has generated exciting and increasingly complex dialogues probing the foundation of urban citizenship's variants (e.g., Belanger 2011b, Fiske, Belanger & Gregory 2010; Walker 2006; Wood 2003). Wilson & Peters (2005) have for instance explored how cities shape relationships to the land and how they inform regional kinship networks that include satellite First Nations. Preserving kinship networks, it should be noted, also tends to challenge the imposition of physical and ideological boundaries, which complicates the state's attempts to assign unambiguously rigid categorizations concerning who is and who is not an Indian, which in turn often influences how successfully one is able to navigate the urban setting.

As is evident from this brief discussion, the evolution of an urban Aboriginal identity and the attendant communities has improved in recent decades thus demonstrating cultural resiliency that is manifesting itself in arts, culture, and institutional development. Yet, notwithstanding its decades-long presence and sustained evolution, the urban Aboriginal community faces ongoing

challenges. One of the more important and enduring issues in both locales is the lack of affordable, adequate and suitable housing. That is discussed in the next section.

### **3. Housing & Urban Aboriginal Peoples**

Finding suitable housing remains a challenge for many urban Aboriginal individuals and families. According to 2006 Canada Census data just over half (54%) of the 1,172,790 people identifying themselves as members of at least one of Canada's Aboriginal groups (Indian, Métis or Inuit) resided in urban areas (see Environics Institute 2010, Belanger 2010). Using Canadian Housing Mortgage Corporation (CMHC) data, NAHO in 2006 estimated that more than one-third of Canada's Aboriginal population lived in inadequate, unsuitable or unaffordable housing compared to 18% of the non-Aboriginal population. Further elaboration on the urban Aboriginal experience is difficult to undertake, although recent years have witnessed improved attempts at capturing this experience (see Walker 2008). On the one hand, we know that the cities can offer enhanced educational opportunities, recreational options, and access to employment. Yet when compared to mainstream Canadians urban Aboriginal peoples experience lower incomes, higher rates of unemployment and poverty, and higher incidences of single parenthood and domestic violence (Hanselmann 2001; Lezubski, Silver & Black 2000; Mendelson 2004).

In terms of home ownership, most studies show that urban Aboriginal peoples experience comparatively depressed living conditions, which in turn negatively impacts individual and collective socio-economic outcomes. As the CHMC has determined, however, improving socio-economic conditions arguably begins with adequate and affordable housing, and this is accomplished by establishing housing circumstances that meet three conditions:

- (1) Adequate housing: a dwelling must have full bathroom facilities and, according to its residents, require no major repairs;
- (2) Suitable housing: a dwelling must have enough bedrooms for the size and make-up of the occupying household, as defined by the National Occupancy Standards;
- (3) Affordable housing: total shelter and utility costs must consume less than 30% of household income (CMHC 1996b, 1).

An individual or household whose housing does not meet one of these needs, and whose income is insufficient to afford rental housing that does meet these standards, is considered to be in core housing need. The core housing need measure assesses need against three separate housing standards: affordability, suitability (crowding) and adequacy. Often these three categories overlap or are identified in tandem. Notably, once adequate, suitable, and affordable housing is accessible and a sense of stability and security is in place, finding one's place in the city poses fewer challenges.

During the last two decades the CMHC has frequently reported on urban Aboriginal living conditions. In 1991, for example, it identified that more than half of all urban Aboriginal households nationally fell below one or more of the housing standards. It also cited the significance of reserve-housing conditions; specifically, that housing related health issues, family tensions, and violence were the three primary drivers of Aboriginal urban migration during the 1990s (CMHC 1996a; also Barsh 1997). Several years later the CMHC (1995, 2) again identified urban Aboriginal individuals as more apt to "lack sufficient income to obtain adequate, suitable rental accommodations ... without having to pay 30% or more of their gross household income." By 2006, the CMHC (2011) concluded that 20.4% of Aboriginal peoples were living in core housing need, which almost doubled that of the non-Aboriginal population (12.7%). There is

room for optimism, however, for as discussed below the available data shows improvement in recent years. These trends will be explored in greater detail below.

#### **4. Aboriginal Homelessness**

Homelessness is often associated with the lack of affordable housing, and is a condition that affects every urban population. While not unique to Aboriginal peoples, they are markedly overrepresented (CMHC 1999). But what does it mean to be homeless? In its recent attempts to develop a pan-Canadian definition of homelessness, the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) has developed the following working classification (Homeless Hub 2012):

Homelessness describes a range of housing and shelter circumstances, with people being absolutely homeless at one end, and experiencing housing exclusion (being precariously or inadequately housed) at the other. That is, homelessness encompasses a range of physical living situations, organized here in a typology that includes:

1. Unsheltered, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation;
2. Emergency Sheltered, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as Violence Against Women shelters;
3. Provisionally Accommodated, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary, and who do not have their own home or security of tenure, and finally;
4. Insecurely Housed, which describes people who are ‘at risk’ of homelessness, and whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards. It should be noted that for many people homelessness is not a static state but rather a fluid experience, where people’s shelter circumstances and options may shift and change quite dramatically and with frequency.

Homelessness can also be categorized by duration of homelessness that includes:

1. brief homelessness (less than 30 days);
2. short-term homelessness (less than a year); and,
3. chronic homelessness (more than a year), which is more entrenched and long term.

Such periods of homelessness can be continuous in duration or episodic in which people rotate in and out of homelessness.

Liberal definitions of homelessness such as this tend not to be the norm, as the majority of the academic, government, front-line agency, and grey literature tends to only statistically identify rough/street sleepers, while only mentioning other forms of homelessness anecdotally (e.g., couch surfing). Consequently, while those sleeping rough are captured empirically (roughly 20%), most homeless counts overlook the remaining 80% of the homeless community. They are classified as ‘hidden homeless’, thus hindering our attempts to generate an accurate national homeless rate or to capture the national Aboriginal rates of homelessness. This did not however keep the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, Miloon Kothari, from proclaiming Canada’s high reported rate of homelessness a “national emergency” in 2007.

The National Homelessness Secretariat has estimated that there are 150,000 homeless people in Canada (Snow 2008). The Wellesley Institute (2010, 4) has more recently argued for recognizing an absolute homeless population of 300,000 (i.e., sleeping on streets), with between 450,000 and 900,000 people living in overcrowded conditions, using shelters, or couch surfing. How many of this total are Aboriginal is not known. But our understanding of urban Aboriginal homelessness is improving, as various regional homeless census counts now seek out the Aboriginal homeless. Generating accurate data is nevertheless confounded by various reasons ranging from an expressed Aboriginal unwillingness to engage census volunteers to the fluidity of homelessness between reserve and city (Letkemann 2004, 242; Peters & The Prince Albert Grand Council Urban Services Inc. 2009).<sup>2</sup>

The reasons hypothesized to explain Aboriginal homelessness are diverse (e.g., Beavis *et al.* 1997; Kramer & Barker 1996). Homelessness is traceable to systemic issues, the individual desire to cast off responsibilities, the need to ensure the freedom to not having to “answer to

anyone”, to rebelling against societal norms. Weasel Head (2011) has provocatively suggested that the Aboriginal homeless often pursue a fluidity of movement that is reminiscent of traditional pasts. Thurston’s and Mason’s (2010) projected pathways to Aboriginal homelessness elaborates on some of the more accepted issues driving Aboriginal homelessness, which include: (1) the *Indian Act*; (2) jurisdictional and coordination issues; (3) residential schools; (4) child welfare; (5) social marginalization, isolation, and systemic discrimination and stigmatization from within their own reserve communities; and, (6) individual “ruptures” or impacts/traumas. Leach (2010) expands on this model by suggesting that residential schools, territorial displacement, and high risk factors such as systemic barriers to employment and education, discrimination/racism, and pathologies such as substance abuse also impel Aboriginal homelessness.

The literature on this issue is surprisingly limited, although several specific examples demonstrate why urban Aboriginal homelessness is both in need of increased academic and bureaucratic attention. For instance, domestic abuse is a major reason Aboriginal women leave their homes (Beavis *et al.*, 1997). And the available housing options tend to be culturally insensitive and inadvertently discriminatory, which highlights a need for additional programs that specifically address urban Aboriginal women’s unique needs, thus decreasing dependency and offering them safe refuge from violence (Native Women’s Association of Canada 2004). Intergenerational trauma resulting from residential school experiences is offered as a direct link to homelessness (Menzies 2007) as are other mental and physical health problems (Beavis *et al.*, 1997). Sexual abuse at home is another factor leading to youth homelessness (Beavis *et al.* 1997; O’Reilly-Fleming 1993; Serge 2005).



The release of Aboriginal ex-offenders from correctional institutions and halfway houses is also of concern, for frequently these individuals return to urban communities lacking basic accommodations (Brown *et al.* 2008). Racism and discrimination have also been suggested as contributing to Aboriginal homelessness, and even though research in Winnipeg and Thompson, for example, statistically demonstrates discrimination against Aboriginal people in the housing rental market (Corrado Research and Evaluation Associates Inc. 2003), nationally “the extent and seriousness of discrimination against Aboriginal people, and the impact of this on homelessness, are hard to measure” (Beavis *et al.* 1997, 10; also Barsh 1997; Belanger 2007; CMHC 2003; Carter & Osborne 2009; Cohen & Corrado 2004). Racism is a contentious issue, especially in conservative communities where members work at projecting tolerance (Fiske, Belanger & Gregory 2010; Kingfisher, 2007). Accordingly, welfare dependency and a lack of motivation<sup>3</sup> are also often cited as homelessness drivers (Sider 2005). And to reiterate, poverty and deplorable housing conditions on reserves force many Aboriginal people into the cities with limited shelter (Beavis *et al.* 1997).

Compounding our collective inability to mitigate these issues is the startling want of comprehensive national policies aimed at ending homelessness, generally (Stewart 2007), most of which were neither designed for nor intended for Aboriginal peoples. Consequently, larger national programs tend to be the only programs available to the Aboriginal homeless. Take the \$753 million National Homelessness Initiative as an example. This three-year program implemented in 1999 was designed to improve community access to programs and services and to alleviate homelessness in 61 communities. The NHI was renewed in 2003, at which time \$45 million was directed to the Urban Aboriginal Homelessness (UAH) module. Walker (2005b) contends that programs similar to the UAH, such as the Urban Aboriginal Strategy to improve

federal policy development, are regressive in that they ultimately fail due to a bureaucratic inability to acknowledge Aboriginal self-determination, which would involve Aboriginal participation in policy development. Instead, the strategy “seeks only to address the urgent ‘problem’ of Aboriginal poverty essentially managing this margin of society in pursuit of greater social cohesion” which maintains the federal government’s paternalistic tendencies (Walker 2005b, 410). The co-production of municipal planning involving local Aboriginal leaders could potentially open up what are now fairly exclusive policy processes to greater Aboriginal participation (e.g., Belanger & Walker 2009), but there are no current joint programs aimed at specifically addressing Aboriginal homelessness and housing issues.

Finally, programs such as Housing First, developed in New York in 1990s, have yet to be utilized to combat the urban Aboriginal housing and homeless issues being discussed. Centered on finding homeless people housing and then providing additional services, Housing First’s underlying principle is that people are better able to move forward with their lives if they are first housed. This five-stage model is promising in that its various phases encourage individual agency while offering upon request the treatment needed to ensure successful transition into becoming a renter. It is an adaptable program that local Friendship Centres and municipal departments responsible for housing and homelessness could utilize independently or in partnership with one another. For one, individuals and families do not need to demonstrate that they are ‘ready’ for housing. Second, clients have some choice regarding the location and type of housing they receive. Third, supports are individually based and available upon request. Fourth, harm reduction is intended to reduce the risks and harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive behaviours. Finally, the goal is to promote social integration into their community,

and this requires socially supportive engagement and the opportunity to participate in meaningful activities (Gaetz 2012).

## **5. Urban Aboriginal People and Housing Policy Background**

Poor urban Aboriginal housing conditions and elevated homelessness levels should be somewhat surprising bearing in mind the federal obsession with Aboriginal housing conditions dating to Canadian Confederation in 1867. A scan of early Indian Agent reports produced during the 1870s highlights bureaucratic enthusiasm for Aboriginal people adopting western-style housing thus ensuring sanitary conditions and ultimately civility. Perry (2003) has explored the link between colonial desires to improve Aboriginal housing and the corresponding societal diffusion of housing, gender, and family-related ideals, noting that limited federal resources were assigned to facilitate this transition. By the early twentieth century bureaucratic attention had however shifted away from housing to securing land surrenders and ensuring residential school attendance (e.g., Martin-McGuire 1998; Miller 2000; Milloy 2000). Reserve-housing policy fell by the wayside until the mid-1950s, but this period of increased interest did not specifically lead to direct improvements. By 1966 federal negligence was exposed in media reports highlighting a full-blown national reserve-housing crisis and a desperate need for “12,000 new homes over a five-year period to meet a backlog of approximately 6,000 units and to take care of new family formation of about 1,250 a year” (Canada 1966, 59). Later that year, Arthur Laing, the Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources, bowed to public pressure and announced a \$84.5 million federal expenditure to improve the existing poor state of reserve housing (Canada 1966).<sup>4</sup>

No mention was made of urban Aboriginal housing, which demonstrates both Ottawa’s emphasis on reserve community concerns; and its ignorance of what Aboriginal Senator Jim

Gladstone (Blood) identified in 1967 as “a great number of Indians ... moving to the cities and towns to get jobs”, and who “need help in getting re-established” (Canada 1967, 1068). A corresponding investigation into Canada’s lackluster public housing ventures culminated in 1969 with the minister responsible for housing, Paul Hellyer’s release of the *Report of the Federal Task Force on Housing and Urban Development*. In response the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs was established in 1971 despite the CMHC’s concerns of direct government involvement with housing policy and programs (Rose 1980). This did not preclude Ottawa from allocating \$200 million to a demonstration-housing project, which led to among other projects the Kinew Housing Corporation (Walker 2004; also 2008). The Kinew Housing Corporation was Canada’s first Aboriginal directed non-profit urban housing corporation, and it emphasized the acquisition and rehabilitation of older homes that were rented to low-income families. Its success stimulated the creation of five more urban Aboriginal non-profit housing societies between 1972 and 1975, and became the prototype for more than 100 such corporations currently operating nationally.

Coincident with these projects’ emergence was escalating Aboriginal urbanization, which was characterized by reserve residents leaving their communities for the promise of improved urban housing conditions, as well as better educational and employment opportunities. Despite these evident trends Ottawa’s program response was erratic. But with federal encouragement, and a desire to assist rural and urban low-income Aboriginal people, the CMHC established the Rural and Native Housing Program in 1974 (this was followed by the Urban Native Housing Program and the On-Reserve Housing Program in 1978). The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) representing Non-Status Indians, a growing majority of which was now living in urban centres, then allied with the CMHC to develop a federal plan that had Ottawa supply mortgage interest assistance through non-repayable subsidies over the mortgage’s term. Several Friendship

Centres and tribal councils subsequently sponsored several housing initiatives, and today more than 100 urban Aboriginal housing institutions responsible for over 10,000 federal rental units operate in all major Canadian urban centers (Manitoba Urban Native Housing Association 2012).

Among the more notable initiatives was the Urban Native Additional Assistance program established in 1984, which bridged the operating costs-operating income gap to “put urban Aboriginal housing institutions on a viable financial footing for the first time while also facilitating operating enhancement in the way of administration, counseling, and maintenance regimes that have contributed significantly to the success of the urban Aboriginal housing institutions” (Congress of Aboriginal Peoples 2004). The CMHC’s willingness to recognize this initiative as separate from similar mainstream programs was innovative, and it further offered administrators the freedom to formulate and provide Aboriginal-specific services that embraced counseling; factored in the increased spending on administration; considered the role and importance of non-traditional households; and recognized their clients’ endemic low-income status.

Unfortunately, a series of Progressive Conservative cutbacks in the late 1980s jeopardized these and other projects, including the Rural and Native Housing Program, which was terminated in 1991. Ottawa managed to cobble together assorted strategies in the interim to enhance urban Aboriginal housing, which included the Remote Housing Program and a host of complementary initiatives. The theme of devolution is evident, however: as the federal government extricated itself from providing urban Aboriginal housing programming a coterie of private, public, and third sector parties inserted itself into the policy void and devised a complex matrix of still-operational programs that are onerous to navigate. For example, low-income Aboriginal people living off reserve are eligible for general CMHC housing programs available to all Canadians.

Then there's the \$1 billion Affordable Housing Initiative, which sought to boost the affordable housing supply through federal cost sharing accords with provincial and territorial governments. Ottawa also spends \$2 billion annually on federal programs accessible to Aboriginal people, which include Public Housing, Non-Profit Housing, Rent Supplement, Rural and Native Housing, Urban Native Housing and Cooperative Housing. With the exception of the Urban Native Housing Program, which provides financial assistance to Aboriginal non-profit organizations, and Aboriginal co-op groups that both own and operate urban rental housing projects, there are few urban Aboriginal housing-specific programs.

On final view, what is striking is the level of attention paid to non-Aboriginal housing issues outside of the reserves, and the limited impact of Canadian policies generally (Miron 1988; Rose 1980). Within this context, Aboriginal housing priorities were and largely remain a conspicuously low priority when compared to the macro, post-1945 Canadian housing policies. Ottawa's retreat from Aboriginal housing programming has compelled many academics and advocates alike to remind Ottawa of its responsibility to adopt a leading role in Aboriginal programming and policy by virtue of its historic relationship with Aboriginal peoples (Graham & Peters 2002, National Aboriginal Housing Association 2004, Walker 2006, 2003). As eloquently stated by the National Aboriginal Housing Association, "... the federal government's fiduciary responsibility to Aboriginal persons applies to all Aboriginal persons regardless of whether they live on or off reserve" (2009, i).

## **6. Urban Aboriginal Housing: A Quantitative Perspective**

The 2006 Canada Census identified 12.4 million households nationally, of which 506,235 were Aboriginal households. The number of off-reserve Aboriginal households grew between

1996-2006, which was a period of corresponding urban Aboriginal growth nationally. An Aboriginal household is defined by CMHC as one of the following:

- a non-family household in which at least 50% of household members self-identified as Aboriginal; or,
- a family household that meets at least one of two criteria:
  - at least one spouse, common-law partner, or lone parent self-identified as an Aboriginal; or,
  - at least 50% of household members self-identified as Aboriginal (CMHC 2012).

Between 1996 and 2006, for example, the Aboriginal population grew by 45%, nearly six times faster than the 8% rate of increase for the non-Aboriginal population. As Table 1 illustrates, despite this accelerated growth, the number of urban Aboriginal households in comparison to non-Aboriginal households did not grow at a proportionate rate. Of note, this 45% growth rate includes large numbers of individuals reporting Aboriginal identity who had not previously identified as Aboriginal. We do not know fully the impact of this trend, but estimate that it would have a significant effect on an issue such as housing, for the majority of these people would have had a house before and after declaring Aboriginal identity (see generally Guimond, Robitaille & Senécal 2009).

<b>Table 1: Off-reserve Households, Canada 2001-2006</b>			
	2001	2006	% Change 2001-2006
Canada (all)	11,562,975	12,437,500	9.3
Aboriginal (off-reserve)	398,400	506,235	7.9

Source: Statistics Canada

In terms of home ownership, Table 2 illustrates that Aboriginal people are less likely to

become homeowners. During the last 15 years greater attention has been directed at the lack of and the various barriers to Aboriginal homeownership, yet minimal policy interventions have been implemented to allay existing obstacles. Few of the various operating housing programs are Aboriginal specific, and rarely is the urban Aboriginal population mentioned. Programs and policies are needed to alleviate the ever-widening gap that exists between those who can and cannot afford homeownership (Moore and Skaburskis 2004). These programs however must respond specifically to forces unique to the Aboriginal experience. For example, Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) has been identified as an issue that hinders Aboriginal renters (e.g., Fiske, Belanger & Gregory 2010).<sup>5</sup> NIMBY tends not to typically influence homebuyers. We would therefore suggest that the issue is socio-economic: low employment participation rates and low-wage jobs make it difficult for Aboriginal people to become homeowners. This conclusion is especially apparent in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, which demonstrate substantial Aboriginal socio-economic disparity and a significant percentage difference in Aboriginal homeownership rates.

Table 2: Home Ownership Rates 2006			
Region	% Canada	% Aboriginal	% Difference
Canada	68.4	50.4	18
NL	78.7	72.6	6.1
PEI	74.1	54	20.1
Nova Scotia	72	56.6	15.4
New Brunswick	75.5	56.2	19.3
Quebec	60.1	51.2	9.9
Ontario	71	55.1	15.9
Manitoba	68.9	43.9	25
Saskatchewan	71.8	40	31.8
Alberta	73.1	50.5	22.6
BC	69.7	52.4	17.3
Yukon	63.8	43	20.8
NWT	52.9	51.2	1.7
Nunavut	22.7	23.7	-1

Source: Statistics Canada



Similar disparities are increasingly apparent amongst several of the Aboriginal population's sub-groups. This could be evidence of what Wotherspoon (2003) has identified as the emergence of an Aboriginal middle class. It is also telling to measure by identity which Aboriginal peoples are more likely to become homeowners. For example, according to Table 3, one is more likely to become a homeowner if one is Métis. Non-Status Indians are second and as such more likely than Status Indians and Inuit, in that order, to become homeowners.<sup>6</sup> Reduced and in many instances increasingly uninhabitable reserve housing stock also negatively impacts reserve home ownership numbers. Many Non-Status Indians are consequently forced to live in the city, where NIMBY tends to make renting more difficult. This has a corresponding impact on all urban Aboriginal people, who are then forced to compete with reserve immigrants (among others) for existing home rental and ownership opportunities. Status Indians, for whom the majority of government programming is intended, appear to be at a disadvantage for urban homeownership. It is important to note the small populations of different groups (particularly Inuit) in many regions when utilizing these figures.

Table 3: Aboriginal Homeownership by Identity 2006				
Region	Status Indian	Non-Status Indian	Métis	Inuit
Canada	40.8%	53.5%	61.6%	34.4%
NL	67.8%	77.9%	75.7%	66.1%
PEI	57.1%	52.9%	47.8%	0%
Nova Scotia	43.4%	60.3%	73.0%	52.3%
New Brunswick	48.1%	64.1%	71.1%	70.4%
Quebec	49.3%	56.0%	58.3%	16.4%
Ontario	49.1%	54.1%	64.8%	40.9%
Manitoba	24.6%	42.9%	60.8%	40.0%
Saskatchewan	21.8%	40.7%	60.2%	82.1%
Alberta	37.3%	51.0%	60.1%	49.2%
BC	47.5%	50.1%	59.9%	43.0%
Yukon	39.3%	56.0%	67.3%	29.2%
NWT	53.2%	49.5%	59.4%	37.9%
Nunavut	21.1%	0.0%	16.7%	23.9%

Source: Statistics Canada

Upon further review, Table 4 suggests that the above-mentioned differences stabilize when we specifically appraise urban identity and home ownership. For the most part, with the exception of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, urban centres are for the most part ‘status-blind’ when it comes to Aboriginal home ownership, as both Status and Non-Status Indians present similar home ownership rates. In the Prairie Provinces, however, Status Indians do appear to be at a distinct disadvantage. Socio-economic disparity is influential, but the sizeable statistical differences suggest that other forces are at play. The data also reveal that, similar to national trends, Métis individuals find it easier to become homeowners in most regions. Finally, it is anticipated that urban Aboriginal housing issues will become more pronounced in Eastern Canada in the near future due to the region demonstrating the fastest growing Aboriginal population nationally. From 2001-2006, Nova Scotia’s Aboriginal population grew by 95%, New Brunswick by 67%, Newfoundland and Labrador by 65%, Quebec by 53% and Ontario by 68%. In the western provinces, the fastest growth was observed in Manitoba (36%) (Canada 2006).

Table 4: Aboriginal Homeownership by Identity, CMAs <sup>7</sup> 2006				
Region	Status Indian	Non-Status Indian	Métis	Inuit
Canada	38.9%	48.2%	54.3%	38.9%
NL	67.3%	65.1%	69.4%	55.0%
PEI	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Nova Scotia	53.1%	52.0%	51.2%	30%
New Brunswick	54.8%	52.1%	45.9%	n/a
Quebec	51.7%	52.4%	50.8%	38.5%
Ontario	47.5%	50.4%	58.3%	31.9%
Manitoba	27.3%	42.4%	55.6%	35.3%
Saskatchewan	24.5%	39.6%	53.8%	n/a
Alberta	35.6%	48.3%	53.2%	42.6%
BC	35.1%	42.2%	50.5%	35.4
Yukon	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
NWT	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Nunavut	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

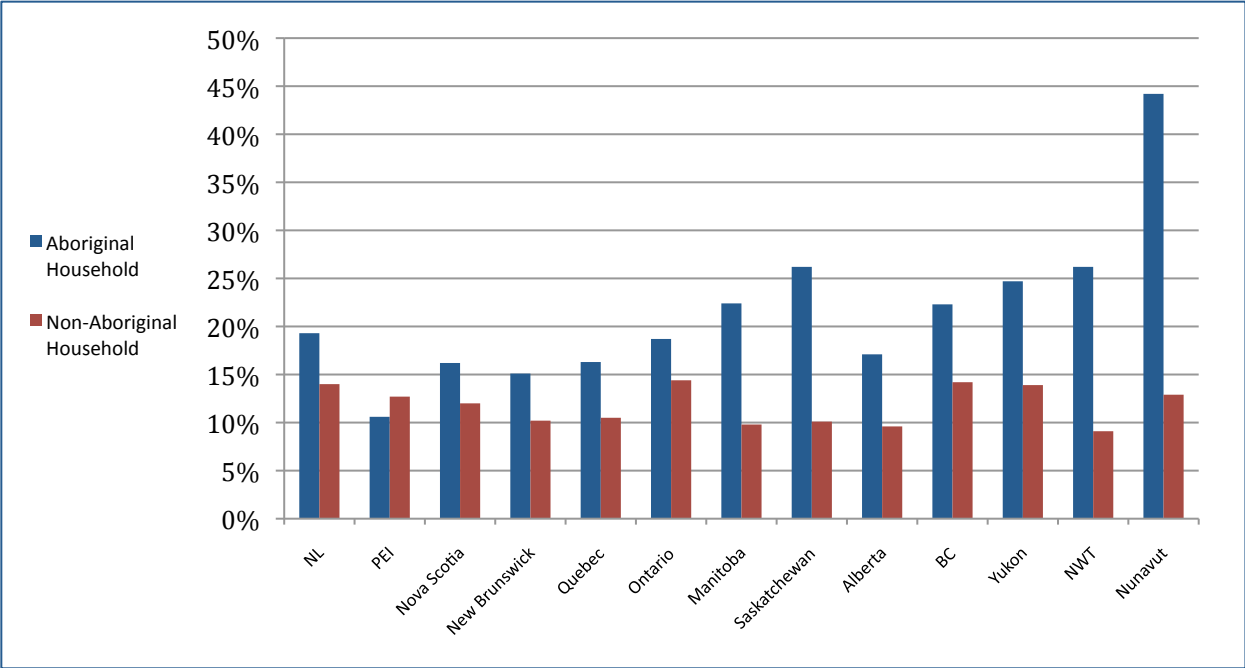
Source: Statistics Canada

It is important to consider whether homeownership actually results in an improved living

standard. Between 1996 and 2006 it was reported that the share of Aboriginal people living in crowded homes declined: in 2006, 11% of Aboriginal people lived in homes with more than one person per room, down from 17% in 1996. At the same time, in 2006 nearly one in four urban Aboriginal people lived in homes requiring major repairs, which was unchanged from 1996. In comparison with non-Aboriginal people, Aboriginal people were also almost four times as likely to live in a crowded dwelling, and they were three times as likely to live in a home in need of major repairs (Canada 2006). This reflects one aspect of core housing need, which the CMHC (2008) defines as “households that are unable to afford shelter that meets adequacy, suitability, and affordability norms. The norms have been adjusted over time to reflect the housing expectations of Canadians. Affordability, one of the elements used to determine core housing need, is recognized as a maximum of 30 per cent of the household income spent on shelter.”

Figure 1 is based on APS data and highlights the level of Aboriginal core housing need for each province and territory for 2006 (note that these data include First Nations reserve statistics).

**Figure 1: Percentage/Incidence of Aboriginal Core Housing Need by Province**



Clearly the level of core housing need is greater among Aboriginal households than non-Aboriginal households, and with the exception of PEI it varies regionally. It is also apparent that the disparity grows as we move from Eastern to Western Canada, and that northern Aboriginal populations confront significant core housing issues. The latter could be expected due in part to a harsher climate than in the south, leading to reduced ability to build efficient housing stock and which ultimately results in more overcrowding. As Table 5 shows, the Aboriginal population (20.4%) presents a higher incidence of core housing need than the non-Aboriginal population (12.4%). In 2006, the CMHC determined that this amounted to 81,800 non-reserve Aboriginal households in core housing need. Once again, while each province and territory presents higher than normal Aboriginal rates, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, provinces with larger proportions of Aboriginal people compared to the overall population, reveal even higher rates of Aboriginal core housing need.

Table 5: Characteristics of Households in Core Housing Need, Canada 2001, 2006						
	All Households		Renters		Owners	
	# Households in Core Housing Need	Incidence of Core Housing Need	# Households in Core Housing Need	Incidence of Core Housing Need	# Households in Core Housing Need	Incidence of Core Housing Need
<b>Abor. Status (2006)</b>						
Non-Aboriginal Household	1,412,580	12.4	918,690	26.8	493,890	6.2
Aboriginal Household	81,810	20.4	63,065	34.9	18,750	8.5
Status Indian	38,740	24.8	31,440	37.9	7,305	10.0
Non-Status Indian	15,860	20.3	12,440	35.1	3,415	8.0
Métis	33,145	16.2	23,260	30.1	9,880	7.7
Inuit	5,705	35.8	4,835	46.4	865	15.6
<b>Abor. Status (2001)</b>						
Non-Aboriginal Household	1,414,075	13.5	955,315	27.9	458,760	6.5
Aboriginal Household	71,265	24.0	56,170	37.7	15,090	10.2
Status Indian	35,745	28.0	29,625	40.8	6,125	11.1
Non-Status Indian	13,590	23.7	10,530	36.7	3,055	10.7
Métis	24,665	19.2	18,055	33.3	6,615	8.9
Inuit	4,680	35.8	3,805	43.3	870	20.3

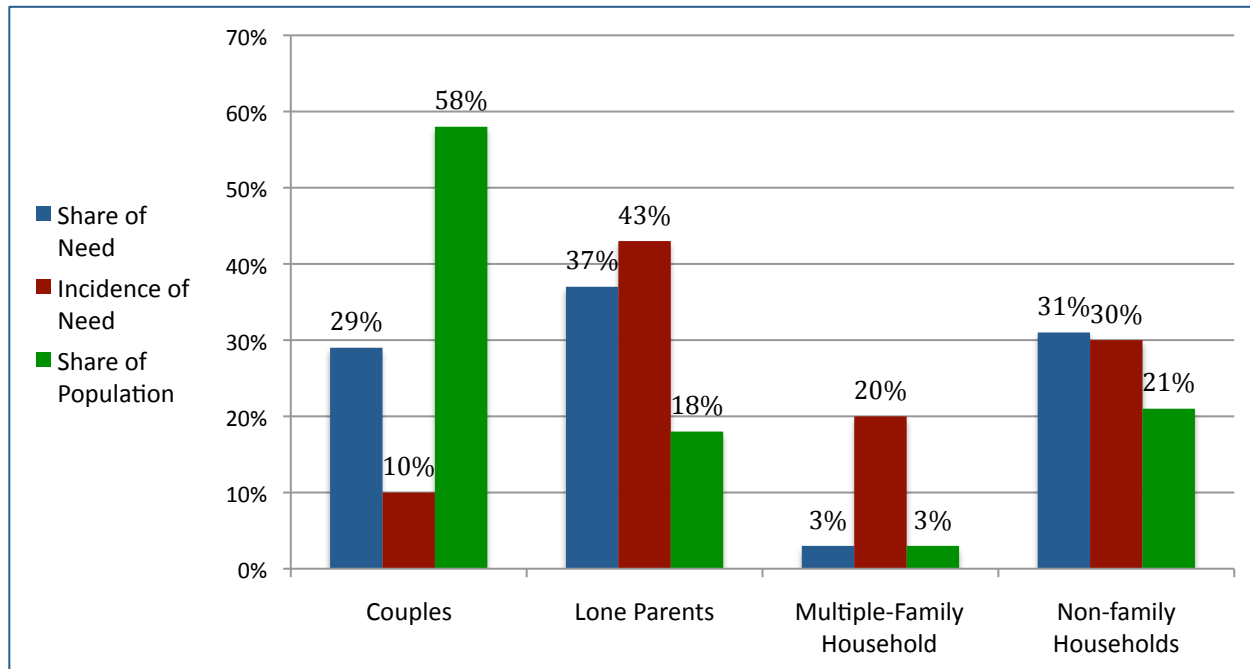
Source: APS (2006)

Inuit housing conditions, and ultimately Inuit homelessness are significant issues that are too often overlooked despite demonstrated inferior housing conditions, although a small number of available studies provide us with some important insights. In Nunavut's capital Iqaluit (pop. 6,699), roughly 53% of Inuit live in overcrowded households, and 15% of the Territory's population is currently on wait lists for public housing. The national voice for the 55,000 Inuit living in 53 communities across the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories), Nunavut, Nunavik (Northern Quebec), and Nunatsiavut (Northern Labrador), the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, has estimated that 3,300 houses are needed to address Nunavut's current housing shortage, followed by an annual allocation of 250 units to keep up with demand. A 2003 Housing Needs Survey in Newfoundland and Labrador highlighted 44% of Inuit households were in 'core need' (NAHO 2008).

There is room for optimism, for excepting Inuit all identity groups demonstrated in general equal declines in core housing need from 2001. Once again, the Métis demonstrate higher urban living satisfaction by virtue of exhibiting lower core housing need, followed by Non-Status and Status Indians. The increased number of Aboriginal households in core housing need on the other hand offsets the declining percentage of core housing need. Here the number of homes increased from 71,000 to 81,800, reflecting a 13.2% increase. Aboriginal renters (34.9%) are more likely to be found in core housing need than non-Aboriginal renters (26.8%), whereas the former account for 77% of Aboriginal household core housing need. The incidence of Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal core housing need for homeowners (8.5% to 6.2%) is slightly lower than it is for renters (34.9% to 26.8%), demonstrating the socioeconomic origin of the evident disparity. Aboriginal individuals who become home owners are therefore statistically less likely to be in core housing need than renters, thus closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal socio-economic outcomes.

As Figure 2 illustrates, Aboriginal couples face the lowest incidence of need, compared with lone parent households, which experience the highest incidence of need (43%). This may be explained by the assumption that reasonably priced and appropriate sized housing for families is difficult to acquire. Housing need tends to also be skewed more toward young family households (which tend to be headed by single mothers) than in the non-Aboriginal population. Nearly 60% of core housing need households are under 45 years of age, while these age groups account for less than half of core need among non-Aboriginal households. Singles, and increasingly elders, require housing and support. Of particular concern are single mothers, which a recent Ontario study highlighted (conclusions that are arguably accepted of national trends): “Urban Aboriginal women are predominantly in the lower income brackets ... with a large number of single-parent families and only moderate earnings, urban Aboriginal women face major challenges in finding childcare, obtaining employment and getting out of poverty” (Urban Aboriginal Task Force 2007, 159).

**Figure 2: Percentage Distribution and Incidence of Aboriginal Housing Need, 2006**



Source: National Aboriginal Housing Association 2009, A-10.

Although affordability is the primary concern, non-reserve Aboriginal households exhibited reduced levels of suitability and adequacy. As highlighted in Table 6, 28% of all Aboriginal households experience a crowding problem; or they live in a dwelling identified as in poor shape (23%). At levels more than twice that of non-Aboriginal households affordability is as serious problem confronting Aboriginal renters and homeowners. This is compounded by the fact that non-reserve Aboriginal incomes are much lower, coming in at on average only 83% that of non-Aboriginal households.

<b>Table 6: Type of Housing Problem Among Households in Core Housing Need, 2006</b>						
	Aboriginal Household			Non-Aboriginal Household		
	Below Adequacy Standard	Below Affordability Standard	Below Suitability Standard	Below Adequacy Standard	Below Affordability Standard	Below Suitability Standard
	Percentage below each standard					
Canada	27.5%	77.9%	23.0%	14.0%	90.0%	15.0%
CMA (100k+)	21.1%	86.3%	22.2%	12.0%	91.0%	18.0%
CAs (10k-100k)	22.5%	88.2%	18.7%	15.0%	94.0%	7.0%
Small Urban Communities	24.7%	84.7%	16.9%	17.0%	92.0%	5.0%
	Overall incidence for each standard					
Canada	5.6%	15.9%	4.7%	1.8%	11.2%	1.8%
CMA (100k+)	4.5%	18.3%	4.7%	1.6%	12.3%	2.4%
CAs (10k-100k)	4.0%	15.7%	3.3%	1.5%	9.5%	0.7%
Small Urban Communities	3.6%	12.3%	2.4%	1.5%	7.8%	0.5%
Adding across columns exceeds 100% as households can experience multiple problems						
Source: APS 2006						

The CMHC in 1995 identified urban Aboriginal individuals as more likely to “lack sufficient income to obtain adequate, suitable rental accommodations ... without having to pay 30% or more of their gross household income”. STIR is the total annual household shelter costs derived from mortgage payments, property taxes, condominium fees, and utility payments; rental shelter costs consists of rent payments plus utilities. Households spending less than 30% of their incomes on shelter are classified as meeting the affordability standard. Households spending 30% or more of their incomes on shelter are classified as not meeting the affordability standard but are not necessarily experiencing housing affordability problems. As Table 7 illustrates,

incomes and shelter costs in core need renter families is almost identical for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal households. The APS data also demonstrates that the majority of the Aboriginal population maintains spouses or common-law partners in both big and midsized cities in provinces and territories. This suggests an emergent sense of family stability, and the largest proportion of primary household maintainers work full time, which confirms why their major source of income was wages and salaries in different provinces and territories.

<b>Table 7: Income and Shelter Costs Among Non-Reserve Households in Core Housing Need, 2006</b>				
	Family		Non Family	
	<i>Average Income</i>			
	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
Canada	\$23,203	\$23,089	\$13,818	\$14,606
CMAAs (100k+)	\$21,340	\$23,903	\$13,978	\$15,136
CAs (10k-100k)	\$19,555	\$19,148	\$12,919	\$12,744
Small Communities	\$21,720	\$18,042	\$12,739	\$12,879
	<i>Average STIR</i>			
Canada	0.34	0.41	0.46	0.49
CMAAs (100k+)	0.40	0.43	0.47	0.49
CAs (10k-100k)	0.42	0.43	0.49	0.47
Small Communities	0.36	0.40	0.48	0.49
	<i>Average Shelter Costs</i>			
Canada	\$659	\$790	\$528	\$591
CMAAs (100k+)	\$714	\$816	\$548	\$618
CAs (10k-100k)	\$683	\$687	\$523	\$517
Small Communities	\$650	\$654	\$505	\$507

Source: APS 2006

Our APS analysis does anticipate some difficulties. For example, whereas Aboriginal houses in both big and midsized cities are suitable for permanent occupancy, the majority of these houses need major and minor repairs. Roughly 40% of Aboriginal people's dwellings in both big and midsized cities across all provinces and territories need either major or minor repairs. We observed that more Aboriginal people live in rental properties than own homes in Vancouver, Regina, Edmonton, Montreal, Winnipeg, Toronto, Yellowknife, and Whitehorse, regions that both demonstrate the highest national housing costs and largest urban Aboriginal populations. Reflecting on the rates of urban Aboriginal renters' core housing need this foretells

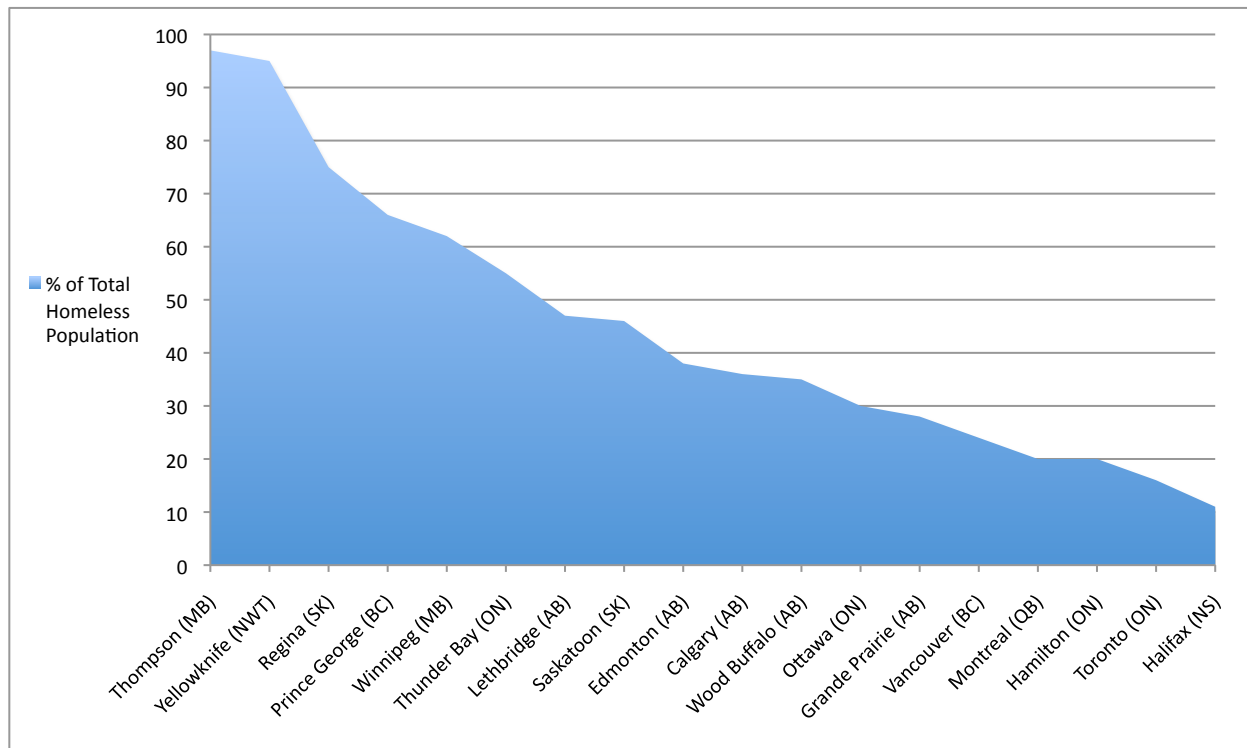


a serious development. Also, the largest proportion of Aboriginal people's dwellings in big cities were constructed before 1980, trends that are evident in mid-sized cities where most homes were constructed before 1980. In Winnipeg and Toronto, for instance, the majority of houses that Aboriginal people currently occupy were built between 1946 and 1960. The age of these homes further implies that they are predisposed to problems, which means that while the majority of Aboriginal renters and homeowners may not currently be in core housing need they may soon find themselves in difficulty. Absent immediate home repair expenditures they can anticipate core housing need status.

## **7. Urban Aboriginal Homelessness**

To date, no comprehensive official national enumeration of the urban Aboriginal homeless population has been conducted, nor has the existing data been compiled or analyzed. Still, the assorted homeless counts undertaken in various cities nationally substantiate that Aboriginal peoples are overrepresented among the chronically homeless. Figure 3 is based on a review of homeless counts undertaken in major urban centres nationally during the last decade, and identifies the presence of a significant Aboriginal homeless population amongst the overall homeless populations in large Canadian cities. The complexity of the issues at a national level precludes an extended discussion, so for the purposes of this report the Alberta situation will be briefly examined to provide context.

**Figure 3: Urban Aboriginal Homeless as Percentage of Overall Homeless Population, Select Canadian Cities<sup>8</sup>**



With the third largest provincial Aboriginal population—currently it is 188,365 people — Alberta is poised to overtake British Columbia to become the second largest provincial Aboriginal population after Ontario by 2017 (Canada 2005). Children and youth are the fastest growing segment of the Aboriginal population: in 2001, the median age of Aboriginal peoples in Alberta was 23 years of age, as compared to 35 years of age among Albertans as a whole (Canada 2005).

Reflecting on current trends, existing projections suggest both rural and urban Aboriginal homelessness rates will remain steady, and are arguably poised to rise. The 2008 homeless count in Calgary showed Aboriginal people represented about 2.5% of Calgary’s total population; yet the Calgary Homeless Foundation concluded that 36% of the overall homeless population was Aboriginal (Bird *et al.* 2010, 7). The 2010 Lethbridge homeless census showed that after two

consecutive years in decline Aboriginal homeless numbers rebounded, and that currently, 55% of the homeless community identify as Aboriginal (City of Lethbridge 2010, 8). A recent study found that 47.2% of shelter users in Lethbridge were of Aboriginal descent: 37.5% self-declared as First Nations; 6.9% self-declared as Métis; and 1.4% identified as Inuit (Belanger 2011a, 7). A 2010 Edmonton study found that of the overall 2,421 homeless individuals counted, 38% were Aboriginal (Homeward Trust Edmonton 2010). In Grande Prairie 28.5% of all clients accessing various projects self-identified as Aboriginal (Hoffart & Cairns 2009). The 2010 homeless count in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo identified 35% of the homeless population self-identified as Aboriginal.

Similar trends have also been identified in Toronto, Vancouver, and Victoria, as well as in Manitoba by the University of Winnipeg's Institute of Urban Studies. The latter has taken the bold step to demand a government response structured to aid families taking in relatives who would be classified as among the hidden homeless (Webster 2007). While the knowledge of general trends is important, a deeper understanding of how homelessness specifically impacts subgroups such as Aboriginal youths (e.g., Baskin 2007), Aboriginal single mothers (e.g., Skelton 2002), and the elderly (e.g., Lange 2010), among others, is needed. For instance, a Vancouver count presented a high representation of individuals less than 25 years of age (39%), and that 45% were women. Students compose a subgroup that is both transient and faces unique obstacles such as lack of educational or vocational opportunities, which in turn leaves it at a disadvantage in the community as compared to the subgroup's non-Aboriginal neighbours (Belanger 2007).

## 8. Conclusions

At a national level, rates of urban Aboriginal homeownership and rental rates are lower than that of mainstream Canada. Aboriginal people also tend to present higher core housing needs and lower income levels. Urban Aboriginal homelessness is a serious issue as evidenced by the conspicuously high rate of Aboriginal representation amongst the national homeless population. We conclude that national policies are needed to specifically aid urban Aboriginal renters and homeowners, and to ameliorate urban Aboriginal homelessness. This is needed for as the above analysis shows, home ownership reduces the gap between mainstream and Aboriginal rates of core housing need. It illustrates further that Aboriginal homeowners become almost the socio-economic equivalent to non-Aboriginal homeowners in terms of urban living satisfaction. The same cannot be said for Aboriginal renters, who are considerably worse off than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, and present higher rates of core housing need and overcrowding. Yet Aboriginal renters show similar to mainstream renter incomes and STIRs. Lower labour market and educational outcomes are powerful influences. Nevertheless, the data demonstrates the gap to be closing in both cases suggesting that reasons beyond simple affordability are at play, such as individual and community-driven resistance to Aboriginal housing initiatives and Aboriginal desires for permanent urban residency. For renters and homeowners this could be also reflective of reserve émigrés lacking basic life skills or knowledge about how to manage their finances. Fear of the processes involved with purchasing a home is likely an issue as is the permanency associated with locking into a 25-year mortgage.

A cyclical process hindering urban Aboriginal renter and homeownership advancement is evident, which in all likelihood impacts homelessness rates. To explain in more detail, NIMBY results in fewer urban Aboriginal rental opportunities, which in turn leads to amplified rates of

multi-family and multi-generational households. In most cases this means that the majority of people in each home are homeless by definition, as they confront overcrowding and other similar issues. Inter- and intra-municipal and inter- and intra-community mobility surfaces as people seeking out a sense of permanency become ever more mobile. Aboriginal neighbourhoods emerge in this environment, and while a sense of community may be develop, often the local living conditions are below acceptable standards, which negatively impacts sense of identity, self, and community. Often failing as renters, this in turn keeps folks from obtaining the skills that are transferable to becoming homeowners, which negatively impacts urban Aboriginal homeownership rates. Older housing stock is the most affordable, but its state of disrepair results in increased maintenance costs thereby leaving the homeowner in constant danger of slipping into core housing need. It is reasonable to suggest that substandard housing conditions have become normalized amongst both reserve and urban Aboriginal populations, and that those in search of improved housing employ an imperfect gauge regarding what is acceptable. This point has yet to be confirmed, and is an important study in need of completion, as is supplementary exploration of the above-mentioned cyclical process.

This type of research would help us answer why Métis and Non-Status Indians are more likely to become homeowners than Status Indians and Inuit. We could hypothesize that higher Métis homeownership rates can be traced to a lack of Aboriginal rights, or an assimilation policy characterized by outright neglect that demanded quicker acclimation to urban living and thus mainstream norms. Similar to Métis, Non-Status Indians were abandoned by Ottawa, and were forced to work within the mainstream system. It could also be that a stereotype abounds amongst landlords and bankers equating Status Indians as lacking collateral thus representing a bad risk to lenders; or lacking the skills needed to ensure the home maintenance landlords desire, therefore

making Non-Status Indians more desirable clients. In such instances the transition into urban society is riddled with obstacles, and this could be impeding urban Aboriginal homeownership rates and rental opportunities, while exacerbating what are already high rates of urban Aboriginal homelessness. Importantly, large numbers of Métis and smaller numbers of First Nations adults who had previously not self-identified as Métis and Aboriginal began reporting their Aboriginal identity from 1996 and 2001. This group of what is sometimes called “ethnically mobile” often reveals better socio-economic performance than other Aboriginal peoples, which in turn helps to better explain the identified homeownership and home rental trends.

We do know that existing programs are inadequate to address the identified Aboriginal housing and homeless issues, and that successful models such as Housing First have been largely overlooked. Our analysis of the dedicated programming indicates that urban Aboriginal housing issues and homelessness are not deemed complementary issues, which means that a common ministry, department or commission has yet to emerge to collectively deal with these issues. We would suggest establishing proactive policies with the goal of facilitating individual transition into urban centres, while also exploring why discrimination and racism remains prevalent for urban Aboriginal renters and homeowners. More importantly, how do these combined issues influence urban Aboriginal homeownership and rental rates, and homelessness? In the spirit of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) recently published recommendations (2012), ensuring improved public education of Aboriginal housing issue and homelessness discussed in this report is essential. Often identifying the cost of one’s behaviours can lead to positive change. For instance, a recent report concluded that Alberta’s total yearly external expenditures to combat poverty were between \$7.1 and \$9.5 billion (Briggs & Lee 2012). Yet studies repeatedly demonstrate that preventative strategies could be effective in alleviating this staggering drain on

that provincial economy. Proactive programming of this variety while requiring an up-front expenditure could be effective in combating the various issues identified above.

As the Nobel-Prize winning economist Amartya Sen (1999) has shown, poverty and social exclusion create barriers to community life participation, which is often seen in our children's inability to develop to their full potential. Ensuring adequate urban housing is an important first step in ending these inequalities.

## 9. Recommendations

- 1) Formally endorse the National Aboriginal Housing Association's call for a national non-reserve housing strategy. Specifically, the Government of Canada and the provincial and territorial governments need to meet fully, in co-operation with Aboriginal people and within 10 years, the need for adequate housing of Aboriginal people not living on reserves.
- 2) Establish a Housing and Homelessness Secretariat devoted to reserve and urban Aboriginal housing and homelessness issues.
- 3) Additional research is required to determine why, for example, Métis and Non-Status Indians are more likely to become homeowners than Status Indians and Inuit.
- 4) A comprehensive national enumeration of Aboriginal homelessness must be conducted. In its stead, a comprehensive research report evaluating the existing reports and data sets that explore the issues of urban Aboriginal homelessness from federal, provincial, and regional perspectives, is needed to help unpack the systemic drivers of existing difficulties.
- 5) The nature of homelessness needs to be explored, as does our understanding of rural Aboriginal homeless rates and its impact on urban trends.
- 6) Reinstate and increase funding for new social housing and mortgage subsidies under the CMHC's Aboriginal off-reserve programs.
- 7) Provide greater autonomy and flexibility to Aboriginal organizations delivering programs in rural areas and to urban social housing corporations.
- 8) For both urban Aboriginal renters and homeowners, explore the socio-economic reasons leading to core housing need.



- 9) Determine whether low labour market and educational outcomes are impeding urban Aboriginal homeownership.
- 10) A national study is required to explore the impacts of NIMBY on rental opportunities, and the related influence over urban Aboriginal homeless rates.
- 11) More attention needs to be devoted to creating proactive policies to assist with urban Aboriginal homeownership and improving rental opportunities, and to combat urban Aboriginal homelessness. This is by no means a call for augmented assimilation policies, but rather a call for appropriate ameliorative strategies to assist with urban acclimation and attaining homeownership.
- 12) Provide rental subsidies as a cost-effective option where rental markets exist.
- 13) Public education strategies need to be developed to show NIMBY's negative impact of on rental opportunities, and how improved homeownership rates translate into lower public response costs for poverty programming.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Aboriginal Peoples Survey was a national survey of Aboriginal peoples (First Nations peoples living off reserve, Métis and Inuit) in Canada. The survey provides valuable data on the social and economic conditions of Aboriginal people 6 years of age and over. The APS complements other sources of information and surveys, including the Census of Population and the National Household Survey. The APS informs policy and programming activities that are aimed at improving the well-being of Aboriginal peoples and is an important source of information for a variety of stakeholders including Aboriginal organizations, communities, service providers, researchers, governments and the general public. The survey was carried out by Statistics Canada with funding provided by three federal departments: Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Health Canada and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Anecdotally some of the reasons for not participating in the census include the fact many aboriginal homeless feel they are only numbers being counted – “we are like cattle and after the count, no one bothers with us.”

<sup>3</sup> Admittedly the language here is challenging. From a more practical perspective, lack of motivation, for example, is a by-product of other systemic forces. It is difficult to attempt to change something when one cannot see the relevance, or the results.

<sup>4</sup> This would be \$582,413,053 in current dollars (February 2012) adjusted for inflation.

<sup>5</sup> NIMBY (not in my backyard) is perceived as a problem to be resolved, and constituted as a “syndrome”. NIMBY is positioned as a response to alleged social and economic threats associated with the siting of undesired facilities within a neighborhood or community. NIMBY resistance emerges in response to the perceived negative social character of nonmarket housing residents and fears that their presence will lead to devaluation of private property and disruption of community harmony and safety. Strategies to overcome NIMBYism range from consultation processes to creating equity insurance in order to protect homeowners from declining house values.

<sup>6</sup> It must be noted that these aggregate data include reserve data, and that Non-Status Indians are often denied the ability to live on reserve, which in turn precludes them from reserve home ownership.

<sup>7</sup> A census metropolitan area (CMA) is formed by one or more adjacent municipalities centred on a large urban area (known as the urban core). A CMA must have a total population of at least 100,000 of which 50,000 or more must live in the urban core. A CMA is delineated using adjacent municipalities (census subdivisions) as building blocks. These census subdivisions (CSDs) are included in the CMA if they meet at least one of the following rules. The rules are ranked in order of priority. A CSD obeying the rules for two or more CMAs is included in the one for which it has the highest ranked rule. If the CSD meets rules that have the same rank, the decision is based on the population or the number of commuters involved. A CMA is delineated to ensure spatial contiguity.

<sup>8</sup> The following reports were referenced in constructing this table: Canada. (2010). *Urban Aboriginal Strategy Projects, 2009-2010*; Nick Falvo. (2011). *Homelessness in Yellowknife: An Emerging Social Challenge*. Toronto: The Homeless Hub; Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. (2011). *Metro Vancouver Count Finds Same Number of Homeless But More People Using Emergency Shelters*; Hamilton. (2006). *On Any Given Night: Measuring Homelessness in Hamilton*. Hamilton, ON: Community Services; Jim Ward & Associates.

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