

Homelessness Amongst the Inuit in Quebec, Canada

“Nunavik’s Inuit families live in a toxic housing environment.”

—An assertion signed by 11 Quebec university professors and researchers in a September 15, 2010 letter to the editor of the Montreal newspaper, La Presse. They refer to the current housing crisis in Nunavik, a Quebec region north of the fifty-fifth parallel, where some 10,000 Inuit live in 14 coastal communities.

- More than 60 percent of the Inuit population is under 30 years old
- Employment in Nunavik comes from the government, tourism, mining, transportation, the service industry, and Inuit art
- The cost of living in Nunavik is almost double that of Quebec city
- Inuit pay taxes like any other citizen of Quebec and Canada; they are not subject to the federal Indian Act

A time of change in Nunavik

In the last 65 years, Nunavik Inuit have been undergoing a series of changes that continue to have a significant impact on that population. This major transitional period began shortly before the Second World War, when the collapse of the fur economy caused periods of intense hunger amongst the Inuit. The presence of American bases in all northern regions of Canada, including Nunavik, led the Canadian government to assert itself in the North as it began to fear the loss of sovereignty over its northern territories.

In 1953, an officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was the first federal official to arrive in Kuujuaq, considered Nunavik’s regional capital. The establishment of federal services in the region led to the creation of a new system of governance that facilitated access to health care and created the federal residential schools that would go on to cause the breakdown of the Inuit family unit. Other tragic events, such as relocating groups of Nunavik to the High Arctic in the name of sovereignty and the slaughter of sled dogs by police officers, compounded the abrupt transition from the Inuit semi-nomadic life to settlement in villages. These drastic changes have had a direct impact on traditional values, on the roles of men and women, on the Inuit language (Inuktitut), as well as on food security and housing security.

Because of political decisions made by the federal government, we are now facing the worst-yet housing crisis in Nunavik. Such a crisis entails serious familial and community problems. Housing units are too small; they are overcrowded and do not meet the requirements of the sedentary life that Inuit themselves did not even choose. This overcrowding has a major impact on the development of children, both in terms of their physical health (they are more vulnerable to infections and chronic lung disease) as well as their psychological well-being (they exhibit symptoms of distress, including difficulties in impulse control and in learning at school). Several studies have shown a very high correlation between overcrowded housing and physical abuse and sexual

assault against children. Additionally, one of the highest suicide rates in Canada is found in Nunavik.

In one study conducted in Nunavut, Nunavik's northern neighbour, researchers wrote, **“Inuit are dealing with an historical trauma, the cumulative effect of massive social change forced on a people over a short period of time.”** The same conclusion holds true for Nunavik.

The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, signed in 1975, completely changed the political and legal status of Nunavik. A new governmental structure was created, consisting of 14 municipalities under the province of Quebec's jurisdiction. The province also created three institutions that would provide programs and services to all residents of Nunavik: the Kativik School Board, the Kativik Regional Government, and the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services. The federal government also pledged to finance a significant portion of the programs and activities of these organizations.

Hidden homelessness in northern communities

In recent years, we have been witnessing a new phenomenon in all communities: hidden homelessness, the result of insufficient housing, which greatly exacerbates family and community problems. There is an immediate need for 1,000 new dwellings in Nunavik, where statistics show the highest rate of housing overcrowding in Canada. Similar plights can be observed in Nuuk, Greenland's capital, and in Iqaluit, Nunavut's capital, where the situation has become endemic (reference: *The Little Voices of Nunavut: A Study of Women's Homelessness North of 60*).

Urban Inuit in Canada

In 2006, 20 percent of Canada's Inuit population lived in southern Canadian cities: Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, and St. John's (Newfoundland). This phenomenon is recent, dating back only to the 1980s.

In Montreal, there are about 1,000 Inuit—67 percent of them are from Nunavik, 27 percent from Nunavut, and 6 percent from Labrador (the province of Newfoundland-Labrador).

Several things ***draw*** Inuit to Montreal: jobs (especially with Inuit organizations and institutions based in Montreal); post-secondary studies; accompanying a family member for hospital care (about 150 to 200 people at any given time); and the allure of city life. Almost half of Inuit adults in Montreal are employed.

Other things ***drive*** Inuit away from their home communities: the high cost of living in Nunavik; the housing crisis; physical and sexual abuse; prison sentences; and marital problems.

Inuit homelessness in Montreal originates in Nunavik

Inuit represent 10 percent of the aboriginal population in Montreal, but they count for 45 percent of homeless aboriginal people in the city. The representation of men and women

is evenly distributed. This homelessness generates physical and mental health problems, as these women and men are uprooted from their culture (reference: “Nunavik housing crunch squeezes Inuit onto Montreal streets,” *Nunatsiaq News*, May 27, 2008). Indeed, many women flee from domestic violence in their home communities, only to reconnect with it in the city (reference: “The dream of the South: leaving the violence of hell for an artificial paradise,” an article in *Le Devoir*, February 26-27, 2005). Other Inuit migrate to Montreal after completing penal terms in federal or Quebec detention centers. Some of them are forbidden from returning to their home communities by order of the courts, or they are simply no longer welcome in North. With no other alternatives, they quietly drift into homelessness.

Homelessness strategy and action plan

In addition to the structuring of new municipalities and three new institutions to provide programs and services to residents of Nunavik, the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement provided for the establishment of Makivik Corporation (www.makivik.org). One of Makivik’s principle mandates is to manage the compensation fund that was paid to Inuit upon the development of a major hydroelectric project in James Bay. Makivik also fights against poverty, promotes the welfare, progress, and education of Inuit, stimulates economic development, supports Nunavik communities, and promotes and protects the Inuit way of life. Since its inception in 1978, Makivik has demonstrated political, cultural, and economic leadership in establishing and developing a Nunavik region where Inuit are able to find a place and create a distinct identity.

According to Inuit leaders, attention and resources must be directed towards children and families. Traditions that sustained the lives of Inuit for centuries are not adapted to the realities of a changing world—the youth of today must have a good education system and adequate living conditions. Inuit leaders recognize the importance of finding ways to leverage the intellect and the spirit of a younger generation of Inuit.

In October 2008, Makivik delivered to the provincial government’s Social Affairs Committee a study on Inuit homelessness in Quebec, especially in Montreal. In November 2009, the Commission issued a report on the matter and proposed references and suggestions for dealing with aboriginal and Inuit homelessness. The following month, Quebec released its 2010-2013 interdepartmental plan to deal with homelessness in the province.

Recently, Makivik Corporation moved to take the initiative in developing a strategy and action plan on Inuit homelessness with two components:

1. the development of adequate medical care and social services for homeless Inuit in Montreal; and
2. the prevention of homelessness.

Partnerships will be promoted with other organizations in Nunavik and Nunavut, as well as with national Inuit organizations, various agencies working with homeless people, the City of Montreal, the governments of Quebec and Canada, and the private sector. Partnerships will take advantage of the vast knowledge and expertise of these diverse

organizations and will enable the initiative to better target suitable interventions.

Unfortunately, other than the work of Professor Nobuhiro Kishigami of Osaka, Japan, there is little research available on urban Inuit and Inuit homelessness. Applied research ought to play a role of great importance in this initiative, and a partnership with researchers is therefore strongly recommended. An evaluation of the living situations of Inuit in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Labrador, and Greenland would be an important source of information for further development of strategies, as would an inventory of these regions' programs, projects, and initiatives.

Any project to address homelessness must not ignore the reality of Inuit. The major objectives must be to ensure:

1. adequate housing;
2. adequate incomes and continued integration strategies (developing employability through education and training, facilitating job searching); and
3. ensure the provision of medical and social services (developing support services, especially support for adjusting to urban life, substance abuse treatment, and language interpretation services).

The outlook for Inuit homelessness in Montreal

Homelessness can either become a norm in our society, or we can ensure it does not become a continuing problem by ensuring adequate housing, income, social services, and medical care. For certain, if nothing is done we will experience a rise in Inuit homelessness, which will incur further problems, social burdens, and an enormous financial cost for governments, including the City of Montreal.

“Nunavik—running out of patience” is the title of a long article about the shortage of housing in Nunavik which appeared in the September 13, 2010, edition of *La Presse*. The article elaborates: “Out of patience, the president of Makivik, Pita Aatami, who oversees the development of the Inuit community, says that people in the South would never tolerate the situation that residents of Nunavik are confronted with.”

Conclusion

The causes of hidden homelessness in Nunavik and homelessness in Montreal both originate in Nunavik.

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