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NO PLACE TO CALL HOME. INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND THE PROBLEM OF HOMELESSNESS

Abstract

What is the meaning of the word 'indigenous'? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it means: 'originating or occurring naturally in a particular place.' Paradoxically, what was first taken away from the people we define by this umbrella term is a place of their own. It is important to realize that not only their birthright to housing and organizing their living space has been violated. The lack of place is also a contradiction of the word 'indigenous', and thereby a direct cause of most problems connected with the contemporary situation of indigenous peoples around the globe. That is why, this paper presents research on the topic of homelessness among indigenous peoples. For the purpose of discussing the problem in more detail, the focus is on two particular native groups: Indigenous peoples of America (First Nations, the Inuit, the Métis) and Aboriginal Australians. For the sake of clarity, First Nations, the Inuit, the Métis are referred to as 'Indigenous', and native Australians as 'Aboriginal', although these two words are in fact synonymous. The aim of this bipartite study is also to compare the situation of native groups and laws that govern public space from two entirely different parts of the world, and to check whether there are more similarities or differences regarding the issue of homelessness.

KEYWORDS

homelessness, indigenous, First Nations, the Inuit, the Métis, aboriginal, Aboriginal Australians

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

bezdomność, tubylczy, Pierwsze Narody, Inuici, Metysi, rodowity, Aborygeni australijscy

Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests,
but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head.
Luke 9:58, MEV

At the beginning, we will take a look at the definition of homelessness.[1] It is worth noticing that homelessness from an indigenous perspective does not fit neatly into the classical First World's typologies, such as Canadian ones: 'unsheltered', 'emergency sheltered', 'provisionally sheltered', and 'at risk of homelessness'. The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, an organization whose research has heavily influenced my study, has worked to define the Indigenous homelessness from an Indigenous perspective. Based on this, it is clear that being without a home, according to an Indigenous worldview, is not simply having no accommodation or structural habitation but rather the lack of a web of relationships that involves: connections to human kinship networks; relations to animals, plants, spirits, and elements; relationship to the Earth, lands, waters, and territories; and connection to traditional stories, songs, teachings, names, and ancestors. All these aspects of the interconnectedness are known as 'home' in Indigenous societies and worldviews.[2]

The concepts of home and homelessness may also differ across different communities in Australia. Homelessness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities cannot be understood without a reference to the legacy of colonization and dispossession. The concepts of a country are fundamental to the culture and identity as being homeless they have a spiritual connection to the land they live on irrespective of the type of shelter they live in. Some Aboriginal Australians may experience separation from their tradition, land, family or kinship groups

[1] The date of the text validity is 1 November 2020.

[2] Homeless Hub: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, www.homelesshub.ca (https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/resources/indigenous-people-and-homelessness?fbclid=IwAR30UjGpgd10b0E2qga3X6s4r_qr8eLcETLKDoGe5VYuO8NSQrypfRXEvrE) (accessed 01.11.2020).

as spiritual homelessness,[3] just like the aforementioned Indigenous peoples of America.

The Indigenous peoples of America is a collective term to encompass the diversity of cultures within First Nations, the Inuit and the Métis. Urban Indigenous peoples experience homelessness at a disproportionate rate and make up a significant percentage of population experiencing homelessness in cities. Research shows that Indigenous homelessness in major urban areas ranges between 20% and 50% of the total homeless population, while other studies have reported that the range may be much wider, at 11–96%. To put it another way, in some Canadian cities, such as Yellowknife or Whitehorse, Indigenous peoples make up 90% of the homeless population. Places like Thunder Bay and Winnipeg fair somewhat better; an average of 50% of those experiencing homelessness are Indigenous. In Toronto, Canada's largest urban centre, Indigenous peoples constitute around 15% of those experiencing homelessness in the city, even though they account for only around a half of the total population. In fact, one study found that 1 in 15 Indigenous peoples in urban centres experience homelessness compared to 1 in 128 for the general population. This means that urban Indigenous peoples are eight times more likely to experience homelessness.[4]

Homelessness amongst Indigenous peoples should be considered a consequence of Canada's history of colonization and exploitation of Indigenous land and populations. The Indian Act (1876) and related policies served to dispossess Indigenous peoples of land, disrupt the practice and transmission of traditional knowledge, undermine the matriarchal role of women, and remove generations of children from their communities into settings where abuse was widespread. The Indian Act, on and off reserve housing, programmes aimed at curbing urban Indigenous homelessness, and the 'system' in general have, it would seem, failed Indigenous peoples nationwide and made their housing insecure from Vancouver to Halifax. Many of the personal issues (including familial dysfunction, substance use, addictions, health issues, community violence) faced by Indigenous peoples can be directly linked to various types of historical trauma. In 2016 in the Metro Vancouver homeless count, homeless youth had increased to the highest level recorded in the region with 397, or 24% of the overall homeless population, under the age of 25. Youth reported that they had been affected by the lack of youth services or cuts to youth programmes from one or more levels of government. Street-involved youth often fall between services tailored to children or adults,

[3] Homelessness NSW, www.homelessnessnsw.org.au (https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/resources/indigenous-people-and-homelessness?fbclid=IwAR30UjGpgd10b0E2qga3X6s4r_qr8eLcETLKDoGe5VYuO8NSQrypfRXEvrE) (accessed 01.11.2020).

[4] Homeless Hub: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, www.homelesshub.ca (https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/resources/indigenous-people-and-homelessness?fbclid=IwAR30UjGpgd10b0E2qga3X6s4r_qr8eLcETLKDoGe5VYuO8NSQrypfRXEvrE) (accessed 01.11.2020).

and this issue is further complicated for Indigenous youth in the child welfare system who age out of many system supports on adulthood. Developmental resources grounded in Indigenous cultural practices are required to prevent homelessness among youth who transition from foster care settings, and also to support youth who have experienced trauma in foster care settings. Indigenous youth compared with non-Indigenous youth have a higher likelihood of experimenting with substances at a younger age and using substances persistently into adulthood. Early initiation into drug use poses a significant risk for adverse outcomes, such as infectious disease and other morbidity or mortality. Youth who have initiated injection drug use at an earlier age have been found to be more likely to become infected with HIV and hepatitis C, demonstrating the need for targeted and early intervention for youth at risk of drug use. Few studies have investigated the protective factors related to substance use trajectories for Indigenous youth. Mainstream substance use treatment models have demonstrated limited success for Indigenous people. This may be because the factors responsible for substance use (as well as homelessness and trauma) are unique to the experience of Indigenous people, and require 'treatments' that restore and rebuild Indigenous culture and rights. Approaches that create reconnection to community, culture and traditions have been shown to have a positive impact on substance use. Increased access to psychosocial support, youth recreation and peer support models, and trauma-informed services are also required.[5]

Structural issues of homelessness among Indigenous peoples can include transitions from reserves to urban living, racism, landlord discrimination, low levels of education and unemployment. There are also serious social issues stemming from the historical trauma, including high incarceration rates and high suicide rates amongst the youth.[6] In a study conducted by the 'British Medical Journal' within a sample of Indigenous people, almost half of the participants met criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder, i.e. PTSD (49% compared with 26% among the non-Indigenous), which is consistent with a significant body of literature documenting the historical and continuing trauma experienced by the Indigenous people in Canada. Trauma can be transmitted across generations, based on findings that children of trauma survivors were more likely to have negative responses to stressors and more likely to develop PTSD or depression as a result. Intergener-

[5] B. Bingham, A. Moniruzzaman, M. Patterson, J. Distasio, J. Sareen, J. O'Neil, J. M. Somers, *Indigenous and Non-Indigenous People Experiencing Homelessness and Mental Illness in two Canadian Cities: A Retrospective Analysis and Implications for Culturally Informed Action*, 'BMJ Open' 2019, Vol. 9(4), p. 3.

[6] Homeless Hub: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, www.homelesshub.ca (https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/resources/indigenous-people-and-homelessness?fbclid=IwAR30UjGpgd10b0E2qga3X6s4r_qr8eLcETLKDoGe5VYuO8NSQrypfRXEvrE) (accessed 01.11.2020).

ational trauma represents a complex subtype of PTSD that must be addressed in housing interventions for Indigenous people.[7]

Housing conditions on reserves and in the Métis and Inuit communities are often sub-standard, leading some researchers and Indigenous activists to state that on-reserve housing should also be considered part of homelessness. According the Tamarack Institute's research, Indigenous peoples in Canada are more than eleven times more likely to use a homeless shelter than non-Indigenous people. The analysis also finds that, while Indigenous men are more than ten times more likely to use a homeless shelter over the course of a year than non-Indigenous men, Indigenous women are more than fifteen times more likely to use a homeless shelter than non-Indigenous women over the course of a year. Meanwhile, Indigenous seniors are more than sixteen times more likely to use a homeless shelter over the course of a year than non-Indigenous seniors.[8]

Around three-quarters of participants in the study conducted by a 'Spare Change News' journalist say that they have been subject to discrimination by citizens, police officers and even non-Indigenous homeless people. A comparable proportion have been victims of violence in towns, whether verbal or physical. This violence is often inflicted by friends, ex-partners, other homeless people or police officers. Among the Inuit, the victims of violence are mainly women, but the opposite is true for First Nations. However, most Indigenous people feel safe if they have friends and family with them. Unlike non-native Québécois homeless people, who are often seen alone or in twos or threes on the street, Indigenous homeless people tend to stay in groups. Those who beg share the money collected, and they are supportive and protective of one another. It is not uncommon to see several people or even a dozen from the same family in the group. There are almost as many female Indigenous homeless people as men, which is not the case among non-native homeless people. Another difference is that the majority of Indigenous people continue to get on very well with their families, while non-native people are often in conflict with or completely cut off from their families.[9]

Aboriginal Australians comprise 9% of the homeless population compared with 3.3% of the general population. Similarly, in New Zealand, Maori homelessness has been reported to be five times that of non-Maori.[10] The rate of Aboriginal homelessness varies considerably across jurisdictions. The highest rate was observed in the Northern Territory, with 1 in 4 Aboriginal people in that jurisdiction considered to be homeless (2,462 per 10,000 population). Across

[7] B. Bingham, A. Moniruzzaman, M. Patterson at al., 2019, *op. cit*., p. 6.

[8] N. Falvo, *The Use of Homelessness Shelters by Indigenous Peoples in Canada*, https://www.homelesshub.ca/blog/use-homeless-shelters-indigenous-peoples-canada (accessed 01.11.2020).

[9] I. Raymond, *Indigenous People and Homelessness: A Distinct and Growing Reality*, 'Spare Change News', 5 December 2017, http://sparechangenews.net/2017/12/indigenous-people-homelessness-distinct-growing-reality (accessed 01.11.2020).

[10] B. Bingham, A. Moniruzzaman, M. Patterson et al., 2019, *op. cit*., p. 1.

the other jurisdictions, the rate of homelessness for Aboriginal people ranged from 87 homeless people per 10,000 people in Tasmania to 502 homeless per 10,000 people in the Australian Capital Territory. It is worth noticing that between 2006 and 2011, the rate of homelessness among Aboriginal people decreased in most jurisdictions. In contrast, for non-Aboriginal people the rate of homelessness increased in all but two jurisdictions (Queensland and the Northern Territory). In 2011, the types of homelessness experienced by Aboriginal homeless people varied across the states and territories. As noted earlier, most (92%) of the homeless in the Northern Territory lived in severely crowded dwellings. Severe crowding among Aboriginal homeless people in the other jurisdictions ranged from 6% in Victoria to 79% in Western Australia.

There are substantial differences in the distribution of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness across remoteness areas. For Aboriginal people, the highest proportion of homeless people was in 'Very remote areas', followed by 'Major cities'. In 2011, 7 in 10 Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness were in remote areas: 60% in 'Very remote areas' and 10% in 'Remote areas'. By comparison, 21% of all Aboriginal Australians lived in 'Remote' and 'Very remote areas' of Australia, indicating homeless Aboriginal people were over-represented in these areas. As detailed below, nearly all (97%) of the Aboriginal homeless people in 'Very remote areas' and most (71%) of those in 'Remote areas' lived in severely crowded dwellings. About 12% of Aboriginal homeless people were enumerated in 'Major cities', and the remaining 17% in regional areas (6% in 'Inner regional' and 11% in 'Outer regional'). For non-Aboriginal people, the number experiencing homelessness decreased with increasing remoteness, broadly reflecting the distribution of the total non-Aboriginal population. Nearly three-quarters (74%) were in 'Major cities', 15% in 'Inner regional areas', 8% in 'Outer regional areas', with 3% in 'Remote' and 'Very remote areas'.

There is considerable variation in the types of homelessness experienced by Aboriginal homeless people across remoteness areas. The proportion of Aboriginal homeless people who lived in severely crowded dwellings increased with remoteness, from 19% of those in 'Major cities' to 97% of those in 'Very remote areas'. Aboriginal people in 'Very remote areas' who lived in severely crowded dwellings made up 59% of the total Aboriginal homeless population in 2011. 'Major cities' and 'Inner regional areas' had the highest proportions of Aboriginal people who were homeless and lived in supported accommodation (44% and 42% of homeless Aboriginal people, respectively). In comparison, among non-Aboriginal homeless people, those in severely crowded dwellings made up 13% of the homeless in 'Very remote areas', and a relatively larger proportion (35%) of those in 'Major cities'. The proportion of non-Aboriginal homeless people in supported accommodation was highest in 'Inner regional areas' (27%), followed by 'Major cities' (20%).

The Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC) distinguishes between shelter clients who, at the beginning of their support period, were home-

less and those who were at risk of homelessness. In 2012–2013, a slightly larger proportion of Aboriginal clients (52%) were homeless at the beginning of their first support period when compared with non-Aboriginal clients (49%). The remaining clients were considered to be at risk of homelessness at the time they began receiving support from an agency (48% of Aboriginal clients and 51% of non-Aboriginal clients). Of Aboriginal clients who experienced homelessness at some time during 2012–2013, 4.9% experienced more than one period of homelessness (that is, moved out of homelessness and back into homelessness during the year). This compares with 5.2% in 2011–2012. Among non-Aboriginal clients, 3.7% had more than one period of homelessness during 2012–2013, compared with 4.6% during 2011–2012.

The majority of Aboriginal clients are female: 62% in 2012–2013. Considered in relation to the total Aboriginal population, about 1 in 10 Aboriginal females (970 per 10,000 population) accessed specialist homelessness services in 2012–2013, compared with about 1 in 17 Aboriginal males (595 per 10,000 population). Aboriginal shelter clients are younger than non-Aboriginal clients. For example, clients aged under 10 comprised nearly one-quarter (24%) of Aboriginal clients compared with 14% of non-Aboriginal clients. Meanwhile, 12% of Aboriginal clients were aged 45 and over, compared with 20% of non-Aboriginal clients. These differences by age of clients at least partly reflect the younger age structure of the total Aboriginal population.[11]

Many Aboriginal people live in housing that does not meet their needs. Aboriginal Australians are six times more likely to live in overcrowded conditions that non-Aboriginal Australians. Overcrowding due to a shortage of housing is more severe in rural and remote areas; living in overcrowded conditions may contribute to health issues and family violence, and can disrupt education and work. Overcrowding is one of the biggest causes of 'hidden homelessness' amongst Aboriginal Australian communities. Many Aboriginal people live in remote areas and have to travel to regional centres to access basic services. People who live in town may temporarily stay with their family in overcrowded houses or in public places. Some Aboriginal Australians live in public places in urban areas. They may choose to live in these places on a temporary or permanent basis. Some may wish to return to the country, however, they require services that are only available in urban locations, which highlights the lack of appropriate housing options for Aboriginal Australians and availability of services in regional and rural areas. For others still, it is a lack of means to travel home to the country. The connection to the country may mean some Aboriginal people experience lack of access to or a loss of control of their use of public places as homeless. Aboriginal Australians are also disproportionately affected by laws that govern public space.

[11] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Homelessness among Indigenous Australians*, Canberra 2014, pp. 13–16, 19–21.

Family violence is the primary cause of homelessness for Aboriginal Australians. Aboriginal communities are over-represented as both victims and perpetrators of violent crime. It is worth noticing that 40% of the Aboriginal people in homeless assistance services are women escaping domestic violence and 21% (almost a quarter) of women seeking help from a homeless service as a result of domestic violence are Aboriginal women.[12]

In summary, Indigenous peoples of both ethnicities (technically, in a land of their own) experience homelessness at much higher rates than non-Indigenous people, not to mention some devastating indirect effects of the homelessness phenomenon, such as health problems, family violence, disruption of education and work, lack of spiritual connection to the land and separation from traditions. Solutions to Indigenous homelessness – both prevention and treatment – must involve practices that restore social and cultural power to Indigenous communities. Further research is needed to replicate these findings in other regions and where the historical experiences of Indigenous peoples differ based on varying degrees of political and social autonomy and the preservation of cultural practices.

Addressing Indigenous homelessness requires Indigenous leadership in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. As regards measures that have already been taken, beginning in the late 1990s, the Canadian federal government tried to address homelessness with three new programmes: National Homelessness Initiative, Homelessness Partnering Strategy and Affordable Housing Initiative. The Affordable Housing Management Association (AHMA) is in the best position to provide leadership in Canada as a province-wide, independent Indigenous organization. The AHMA has a proven track record of developing proposals with other organizations that meet government requirements for funding, while addressing Indigenous needs and goals. The AHMA has examined existing research on homelessness in Canada, which reveals that: (i) homelessness programmes designed, delivered and governed by Indigenous people have better outcomes; (ii) better data are needed on the extent, causes, and demographics of Indigenous homelessness; (iii) the findings should be used to develop an effective national Indigenous homelessness strategy. Addressing Aboriginal homelessness is a daunting task, will take time, and needs to involve all levels of government. In is also necessary to engage stakeholders in developing programmes: people living on the streets, chiefs and councils, elders, service providers and non-profit organizations; to support evidence-based solutions and research to develop evidence, gather information by building relationships in communities and participating in 'talking circles'; and to develop a database identifying numbers and gaps in the services. Solutions that are culturally appropriate to Indigenous homelessness should support Indigenous values and traditional practices, with a continuum of services

[12] Homelessness NSW, www.homelessnessnsw.org.au (https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/resources/indigenous-people-and-homelessness?fbclid=IwAR30UjGpgd10b0E2qga3X6s4r_qr8eLcETLKDoGe5VYuO8NSQrypfRXEvrE) (accessed 01.11.2020).

that includes emergency shelter services, structured intake, client participation in service delivery, mental health, physical health, detox and dental services, affordable, supportive transitional and permanent housing, culturally appropriate staffing and training, peer, community and family supports, discharge planning at correctional institutions, education, skills development, employment and income support services, transportation for accessing employment and services.[13] The 'Canadian Medical Association Journal' also emphasizes that, to align with domestic and international law, ethics guidelines, and the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, the development of clinical practice guidelines must be led by First Nations, the Métis and the Inuit, and informed by their diverse and unique worldviews, practices and experiences.[14]

The already mentioned SHSC began helping Aboriginal Australian communities on 1 July 2011. Specialist homelessness agencies that are funded under the National Affordable Housing Agreement and the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness are in scope for the collection. The agencies that are expected to participate in the SHSC are identified by the state and territory departments responsible for the delivery of services. Approximately 1,500 specialist homelessness agencies across Australia participate in the SHSC. All agencies participating in the collection report a standard set of data about the clients they support each month to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). The data collected concern the characteristics and circumstances of a client, what assistance is received, and outcomes. The data are based on support periods or episodes of assistance provided to individual clients. Information on the Indigenous status is only provided by agencies if clients have given explicit consent for this information to be reported. In 2012–2013, the Indigenous status was not reported for 15% of clients (or about 36,800 people).[15]

Arguably, we can assume that currently prospects regarding the problem of homelessness are quite optimistic and social awareness is increasing, whether owing to general efforts or Indigenous peoples themselves. There is still room for improvement though, yet the descendants of former colonizers have to remember that their debt to these native people practically cannot be repaid. Perhaps the best way in which the people who are a direct cause of Indigenous homelessness can help the Indigenous peoples is not to interrupt?

[13] A. Leach, *The Roots of Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada*, 'Parity' 2010, Vol. 23(9), pp. 6–7.

[14] J. Thistle, J. Smylie, *Pekiwewin (Coming Home): Advancing Good Relations with Indigenous People Experiencing Homelessness*, 'Canadian Medical Association Journal' 2020, Vol. 192(10), p. 2.

[15] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–40.

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