



Supplement on First Nations and Inuit

Guide to Good Practices
in Homelessness

FIRST NATIONS AND INUIT

This document provides information on the background, experiences and needs of First Nations and Inuit experiencing homelessness and describes the barriers to service utilization they face. To learn more about implementing specific practices to meet their needs, see the [Accompanying First Nations and Inuit Experiencing Homelessness](#) information sheet.

WHO ARE FIRST NATIONS AND INUIT EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS?

First Nations and Inuit experiencing homelessness represent a diverse group with a wide range of traits and experiences, including their nation or territory of belonging, age or gender. Nevertheless, they share certain commonalities specific to their realities that should be considered.

In Quebec, the term “Indigenous peoples” refers to members of First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities living across the province. For the purposes of this document, it will be used to refer specifically to First Nations and Inuit. Note that the outdated term “Indian” is only used today in the context of the Indian Act to refer to First Nations people. Inuit are not considered Indians under the Indian Act.

There are 11 Indigenous groups in Quebec: 10 First Nations and the Inuit. The 10 First Nations are spread across 41 communities in Quebec. Inuit live in Nunavik, where they make up 90% of the total population, in 15 villages spanning the coasts of Ungava Bay, Hudson Strait and Hudson Bay.

The population of each community is relatively small: most First Nations communities have less than 4,000 inhabitants and Inuit villages have less than 1,000 inhabitants. The Indigenous population in Quebec is, on average, much younger than the non-Indigenous population and is experiencing significant growth.

Many First Nations and Inuit live in Indigenous communities or in northern villages, but more and more live in places like Val-d'Or, La Tuque, Montreal, etc. Montreal is home to the largest Indigenous populations living in urban settings.

Studies show that First Nations and Inuit are much more likely than non-Indigenous people to experience homelessness. In urban centres across Canada, homelessness affects 7 % of the Indigenous population (1 out of 15 individuals) compared to only 0.8 % of the general population (1 out of 128 individuals). Indigenous people experiencing homelessness are overrepresented in emergency shelters across Canada.

The situation is similar in Quebec. According to a homeless count conducted in 11 regions of Quebec in April 2018, 10 % of respondents identified as Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit or Métis), although Indigenous people make up only 2 % of the Quebec population. On the island of Montreal, 12 % of respondents identified as Indigenous, while they represent only 1 % of the city's general population. Inuit were particularly overrepresented among the homeless in Montreal: they constituted 25 % of the Indigenous sample, while they represent about 5 % of the Indigenous population in Montreal.

As part of the same count, more women identified as Indigenous (14 % compared to 9 % for men), particularly for Inuit (4 % versus less than 1 % for men). This trend was somewhat stronger in Montreal, where 17 % of women counted identified as Indigenous (compared to 10 % for men) and 8 % as Inuit (compared to 1 % for men). The tendency to self-identify as Indigenous was also higher among those identifying as something other than male or female (18 % for Quebec and 28 % for Montreal).

In all regions included in the homeless count across Quebec, like elsewhere in Canada, Indigenous people experiencing homelessness, and particularly First Nations people, were more likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to be experiencing hidden homelessness¹ (14 % and 18 % respectively), meaning they were “temporarily staying with others or in a hotel or motel, without a permanent home; or [...] in a rooming house.” It is important to note, however, that the study focused on people experiencing visible homelessness and would not have provided an accurate and nuanced picture of hidden homelessness. On the island of Montreal, the opposite trend was observed: Inuit were more likely to experience hidden homelessness, while First Nations people were more likely to end up sleeping rough or in emergency shelters (i.e. visibly homeless). .

WHAT CHARACTERIZES THEIR PATHWAYS INTO HOMELESSNESS?

As with all people experiencing homelessness, the transition to homelessness for First Nations and Inuit is characterized by the articulation of a number of structural, institutional and interpersonal realities underpinned by historical, political, cultural, geographic and spiritual dynamics.

First Nations and Inuit have endured a long history of colonial rule marked by tragic events and discriminatory policies that have profoundly destabilized family, social and community traditional structures. Among the most significant of these include the enactment of the Indian Act, the residential school system and the “Sixties Scoop.”² These events inflicted long-lasting, intergenerational trauma whose effects take on many forms today: difficulty transmitting values and identity markers to children, mental disorders, substance abuse, domestic and family violence, etc. These factors may lead to homelessness.

In addition, many Indigenous communities and northern villages are experiencing a housing crisis: a lack of adequate housing and a shortage of available stock as a result of policies favouring certain types of households or rules governing renovations. In Nunavik, it can easily take years to secure housing and it is becoming extremely difficult for a single person to obtain housing since families are given priority. Faced with housing shortages, it is not uncommon for several generations to live together under one roof. Such conditions may create tension

¹ For more information on hidden homelessness in Canada, see this report published by Statistics Canada (2016).

and, in the worst cases, lead to abuse, violence and substance use disorders. Unsanitary conditions are common in Indigenous communities, exposing individuals to health risks (e.g., toxic mold, poor water quality).

First Nations and Inuit who choose to leave their communities do so for several reasons: to secure better housing, to chase career or educational opportunities, to reconnect with loved ones, to obtain care and services that are not available in their community or to escape difficult conditions. They may also be forced to temporarily relocate due to an alternate living arrangement or to serve a sentence in a detention centre.

Displacements such as these can push individuals towards homelessness. When they leave their communities and villages, Indigenous people may struggle to adapt to a culture of individualism so different from their own. Indigenous people living in urban settings often face discrimination that can hinder attempts to establish themselves economically and socially, particularly when it comes to securing employment and housing. Insufficient funds to meet the high cost of living can also hamper attempts to settle in the city.

Indigenous women are more likely to be affected by poverty, health problems, mental health issues and difficulty accessing high quality services. Their vulnerable condition has its roots in Canada's legacy of colonialism. Throughout their lives, these women are at particular risk of discrimination and other forms of violence including at home or when interacting with government officials. Their communities often lack the resources necessary to prevent and protect against such violence. In the case of domestic violence, the housing crisis makes it difficult to find alternate accommodation. In this context, many Indigenous women decide to leave their communities. When they arrive in urban areas, they are particularly vulnerable to being picked up by prostitution rings.

Sometimes, individuals face barriers to returning to their community. The financial cost may be too high, especially for people coming from northern villages. In addition, they may not be welcomed by loved ones if they have been incarcerated or committed acts regarded as severe. Youth who have lived outside of the community for a long time due to an alternate

² According to the authors, the addition of section 87 to the Indian Act in 1951 resulted in "the removal and forced adoption of children into non-Indigenous families." However, "this accelerated removal [...] resulted in a population flow to cities in southern Quebec, neighbouring provinces, the United States and even other countries." (Lévesque and Comat, 2018a, p. 19).

living arrangement may experience cultural dislocation (e.g. loss of language) which makes reintegration into their community more difficult.

Individuals who have successfully reintegrated into their communities may face additional barriers that eventually push them back out on the streets, such as being placed on a waiting list for social housing or experiencing the same issues that led to their original departure.

WHAT SETS THEIR EXPERIENCES APART?

Among First Nations and Inuit, homelessness takes certain forms tied to their specific historical, geographical and cultural realities.

“Circular mobility” is a form of unstable housing specific to Indigenous populations characterized by frequent moves between the community of origin and other communities, cities or municipalities. This phenomenon makes it difficult to put down roots and settle in one place. These moves can weaken relationships with loved ones and pose a challenge for the continuity of services.

Mutual aid is very common among First Nations and Inuit, which can lead to hidden homelessness. Individuals who have lost their housing following a separation or who cannot live independently due to an intellectual, mental or physical disability often rely on their network for temporary housing. Community solidarity is also present with visible homelessness. In Montreal and Val-d’Or, First Nations and Inuit experiencing homelessness tend to gather in family-like patterns when sleeping rough or in shelters. Workers at a health centre for women experiencing homelessness note this pattern tends to occur among Inuit women when they are doing well, but these same women isolate themselves when their condition or situation deteriorates.

First Nations and Inuit experiencing homelessness are also likely to come into contact with the justice system. Data from the 2018 homeless count showed that in Montreal, First Nations, Métis and Inuit and people with Indigenous ancestry were more likely than others experiencing homelessness to have been arrested, searched or ticketed (57 % compared to 44 %). A quarter (24 %) had been detained in the year prior to the count, compared to 15 % for non-Indigenous people.

WHAT ARE THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF FIRST NATIONS AND INUIT EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS?

First Nations and Inuit experiencing homelessness require individual, cultural, historical, linguistic, geographic and political acknowledgement.

They need access to culturally safe services and care that are free of racism and discrimination and adapted to meet their needs and realities. These services should be sensitive to their languages, systems of governance, traditional knowledge and spirituality. They may benefit from traditional healing services to address historical and intergenerational trauma. Indigenous women experiencing homelessness wish to be able to report abuse or violence effectively and without fear. Individuals who have lived outside of their community for a long time, especially youth, could benefit from opportunities to connect with their Indigenous identity.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO SERVICE USE?

Most services are organized and delivered around a value system that First Nations and Inuit do not adhere to. This discrepancy results in a “gulf of misunderstanding” for First Nations and Inuit struggling to find their place. This “gulf” also affects non-Indigenous practitioners unaware of the cultures, realities and histories of Indigenous people in Quebec. Furthermore, many Indigenous people in Quebec are more comfortable using their language or English than they are French, so language is also a barrier to service delivery and use.

Memories of abuse, racism or confidentiality breaches may prompt many First Nations and Inuit experiencing homelessness to distrust support services available. They may avoid contact, especially with services associated with an authority (police, child welfare, the justice system). As a result, they are less likely to report abuse or discrimination³. Individuals who, as children, were forced to receive services under the Youth Protection Act may also avoid seeking services as adults. Mothers experiencing homelessness with their children may avoid getting help out of a fear of being separated.

³ For example, 89 % of Indigenous respondents who participated in a study on sexual abuse among First Nations people did not wish to file a complaint because they didn't trust the justice system (study cited in Larivière et al., 2016, p. 38).

First Nations and Inuit experiencing homelessness may be unaware of or unfamiliar with the resources and services available to them when they arrive in a new city or region. Procedures can be complex and may vary depending on the individual's community of origin (e.g., Inuk living in a northern village or southern city; agreement or non-agreement First Nation person; with or without an address in the city). In addition, some culturally adapted services such as emergency shelters, intermediate housing and resources for victims of domestic or family violence might be unavailable in Indigenous communities and urban centres.

WHAT ARE THE PREFERRED INTERVENTION STRATEGIES?



For more information on the preferred intervention strategies for First Nations and Inuit, see the [Accompanying First Nations and Inuit Experiencing Homelessness information sheet](#)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

SUPPLEMENT TO FIND OUT MORE INFORMATION ON FIRST NATIONS AND INUIT BELONGING TO SUBGROUPS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS:

- [Women](#)
- [Youth](#)
- [LGBTQ+](#)

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Key principles of Homelessness: A Guide to Good Practice

- Key principles of Homelessness: A Guide to Good Practice

Information Sheets: Baseline Practices

- Welcoming people experiencing homelessness
- Meeting needs and offering service referrals
- Providing healthcare to people experiencing homelessness
- Supporting people experiencing homelessness

Information Sheets: Frequent Challenges

- Protecting individuals when necessary
- Fostering engagement and involvement
- Understanding and working with people who display disturbing behaviour
- Supporting people with substance abuse and mental health problems
- Accompanying people within the justice system
- Ensuring continuity before, during and after a stay in an institution or home
- Accompanying individuals during a hospital stay
- Addressing unstable housing to prevent homelessness
- Supporting people towards housing stability
- Accompanying First Nations and Inuit experiencing homelessness

Supplements on specific populations

- Women
- Men
- Youth
- Senior citizens
- Individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorders
- Individuals with physical disabilities
- Immigrants
- LGBTQ+
- First Nations and Inuit

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