



INNformation Report Series

The Role of Reconciliation in Ending Child and Family Homelessness

August 2018

The 94 Calls to Action developed as a part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provide a framework for enacting reconciliation in Canada. Fundamental to understanding the role that reconciliation can play in ending child and family homelessness is a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous homelessness.

Research increasingly demonstrates the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples within homeless populations in Canada (ASCHH, 2012; al., 2013, p. 14, Christensen, 2013; Thistle, 2017). One in 128 people in the general urban population experience homelessness; for Indigenous people in a similar setting, the rate is 1 in 15 (Belanger et al., 2013, p. 14). The Calgary context is reflective of national statistics; according to Calgary Homeless Foundation (2016), “Indigenous peoples continue to be very overrepresented in the population experiencing homelessness. While Indigenous peoples make up 3% of Calgary’s general population, they accounted for 20% of those enumerated on the night of the count” (p. 12). The population of Inn from the Cold’s emergency shelter presents as predominantly Indigenous; since 2012, the percentage of families who identify as Indigenous varied between 52–62% (Inn from the Cold, 2012-2016).

Recent research centred on defining Indigenous homelessness identifies many socioeconomic and structural factors that distinguish Indigenous pathways into homelessness and help to identify underlying reasons for this overrepresentation. Jesse Thistle (2017), through extensive engagement with a diverse group of stakeholders from the Indigenous community, including people with lived experience of homelessness, developed twelve dimensions of Indigenous homelessness. These dimensions illuminate the different facets of homelessness that an Indigenous person may experience, from Historic Displacement Homelessness¹ to Spiritual Disconnection Homelessness², among others.



Photo 1. Samantha Urias, (far right) Manager of Indigenous Programs assists Inn from the Cold guests while they make bannock.

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When a sense of place is threatened or lost, as exemplified in the upheaval of the displacement of Indigenous peoples in Canada, it can lead to a loss of rootedness in place or community.

The unique dimensions can be experienced cumulatively, providing a framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of Indigenous homelessness. Vital to the analysis of these different dimensions was the Indigenous perspective on home, which is “a holistic metaphysical understanding of emplacement, rather than a built environment” (Thistle, 2017, p. 15). When a sense of place is threatened or lost, as exemplified in the upheaval of the displacement of Indigenous peoples in Canada, it can lead to a loss of rootedness in place or community (Christensen, 2013). This loss of a sense of place is in and of itself an important and impactful facet of and cause for Indigenous homelessness, and is distinct from non-Indigenous experiences of homelessness. Christensen (2013), notes that through this identification of historical displacement as homelessness, “we begin to recognize the ways in which immediate, individual experiences of homelessness among Indigenous people are indelibly tied to collective experiences such as colonization, sociocultural change and intergenerational trauma (p. 809).

Thistle (2017) ascertains that “Indigenous homelessness [...] is best understood as the outcome of historically constructed and ongoing settler colonization and racism that have displaced and dispossessed First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples from their traditional governance systems and laws, territories, histories, worldviews, ancestors and stories” (p. 6). Structural issues remain as a result of colonial government policies including the Indian Act, the Residential School System, and the Sixties Scoop (ASCHH 2012). Intergenerational trauma as a result of these policies continues to affect Indigenous peoples in profound ways. Residential schools promulgated egregious traumas on students, and one deeply affecting outcome is the loss of transference of parenting skills as a result of familial separation (Christensen, 2013, p. 816). In the ASCHH Plan to End Aboriginal Homelessness in Calgary, “Participants shared stories of growing up in abusive homes and ‘never knowing what the word love meant’ because their parents had grown up in environments of abuse and neglect” (2012, p. 19). This in turn leads to overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system, which demonstrates a continuance of modern policies of assimilation on the part of the Canadian state (Christensen, 2013, p. 812). This example and the myriad other ways in which trauma has been enacted on Indigenous peoples represent a “thorough, complex and intentional unravelling of traditional social and cultural systems, known as cultural genocide, [which] has created and prolonged, and continues to perpetuate, Indigenous homelessness in Canada” (Thistle, 2017, p. 7).



In interviews with Indigenous peoples experiencing homelessness, a consistent recommendation from participants to end Indigenous homelessness in Calgary was to increase access to cultural supports such as Elders and spiritual and cultural guidance.

The TRC has identified fundamental changes necessary to begin and continue the process of reconciliation in Canada through 94 Calls to Action, of which Child Welfare is a central focus, addressing the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in the child welfare system. As noted by ASCHH (2012), “Assistance is needed in the child welfare system to reduce the incidences of family breakdown and high prevalence of Aboriginal children and youth in foster care who are, at alarming rates, being discharged from government/foster care into homelessness” (p. 38). The TRC (2015) calls on the federal government to reduce this overrepresentation by “providing adequate resources to enable Aboriginal communities and child-welfare organizations to keep Aboriginal families together where it is safe to do so, and to keep children in culturally appropriate environments, regardless of where they reside” (p. 1). This would begin to address Cultural Disintegration³ and Loss Homelessness identified as one of the 12 dimensions of Indigenous homelessness (Thistle, 2017, p. 35). In interviews with Indigenous peoples experiencing homelessness, a consistent recommendation from participants to end Indigenous homelessness in Calgary was to increase access to cultural supports such as Elders and spiritual and cultural guidance (ASCHH, 2012, p. 33). Both the ASCHH Plan to End Indigenous Homelessness in Calgary (2012) and the TRC Calls to Action (2015) put significant emphasis on the need for the provision of culturally appropriate environments for Indigenous people.

Inn from the Cold is working to provide this type of environment for Indigenous families and their children who find themselves in our Emergency Family Shelter housing programs. One of the many impacts of providing this type of environment is the potential for reconnection to traditional cultural practices that is often lost in an urban setting. Going to Nose Hill Park for sage picking is one practice that has been offered, as this is a healing practice for many Indigenous communities.

The reason behind going medicine picking is the very significant purpose for sage in almost every day living for most Indigenous people. Sage is used to smudge; it is to be used to ask our Ancestors for guidance within the living world. In order to provide Indigenous families with a variety of options to engage in smudging, Inn from the Cold Indigenous Programs staff offer both a weekly facilitated session with Scott Calling Last from AHS's Elbow River Healing Lodge, and in addition have smudge supplies available on the premises for clients to participate individually when the need arises. Tapisa Kilabuk, the Indigenous Strategy Advisor and Community Liaison at Inn from the Cold, participates in many smudge sessions and in doing so encourages the teaching of gratitude for the participant, their families and the community. She strives to provide a culturally safe approach to addressing trauma within the shelter setting. Although guests may not disclose the healing and positive effects, staff do notice clients feeling more grounded after an activity.

To celebrate Indigenous culture at Inn from the Cold, Indigenous Programs staff organized small and intimate events for Indigenous People's Day (see photos 1-3). In the Early Childhood Development area, colouring pages were provided from Colouring it Forward, an Aboriginal Art colouring book that allows you to learn about traditional values, written and drawn by Indigenous people of Canada. There was story time with books that were Indigenous-based; one was about the impact of residential schools and another told traditional stories of the Inuit. Staff member Eva Fox told a traditional story to the Inn's young guests as well. In the Youth Zone, a dreamcatcher-making station was offered; not only did the guests participate, but many staff came and joined in as well. In reflecting on the events of Indigenous People's Day, Tapisa felt the best part of the day was the feast held, with participation from kitchen staff. Many Indigenous guests joined in the making of bannock, stew, berry soup, and bread for Indigenous tacos. A letter received after fry bread making had made it all the more worthwhile: "Today myself and my partner made bannock for Aboriginal Day... it was so therapeutic for both myself and my Partner as we both love cooking. I am happy I was provided with the opportunity to cook for all the guests at the shelter. I felt so rejuvenated and was a good form of mindfulness. Hai Hai - ish neesh."

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The programming and events spearheaded by Inn from the Cold's Indigenous Program staff members are crucial to the organization's ability to best support Indigenous families experiencing homelessness. It is also

fundamental to beginning an enactment of the TRC's Calls to Action within the organization and further, responds to and supports the ASCHH Plan to end Aboriginal Homelessness in Calgary. Through offering the ability for families to connect with cultural practices, as well as providing safe spaces in which to do so, Inn from the Cold is assisting in a broader healing process that will help to support ending intergenerational trauma, which in turn will support efforts to end family homelessness. Providing culturally-specific supports to Indigenous children and their families, informed by their experiences, is an important step towards ending Indigenous family homelessness.



Photo 2. Eva Fox, Family Support Worker at Inn from the Cold shares a story with a child in the



Photo 3. Volunteers assist shelter guests to make dream catchers in the Youth Lounge at Inn from the Cold.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Historic Displacement Homelessness is defined as “Indigenous kin groups, tribes, communities and Nations removed or displaced from pre-colonial lands, territories, waterways, mobility patterns, seasonal travel, hunting and subsistence patterns, and harvesting and berry-picking grounds (Thistle, 2017, p. 30).
- ² Spiritual Disconnection Homelessness is defined as “An indigenous individual's or community's separation from the ethos of Indigenous culture” (Thistle, 2017, p. 34).
- ³ Cultural Disintegration and Loss Homelessness is defined as “An Indigenous individual's or community's loss of Indigenous cultures, knowledges, identities, names, languages, gender roles, songs traditions, rites of passage, kin groups, clans, moieties and broader community supports” (Thistle, 2017, p. 35).

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The Role of Reconciliation in Ending Child and Family Homelessness

Inn from the Cold, we offer prevention supports, emergency shelter and supportive housing to children and family's at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Calgary. As Alberta's only 24/7, barrier-free family emergency shelter, we work in collaboration with partner agencies within the family sector of Calgary's homeless-serving system-of-care to safeguard the well-being of children and families. Our work is designed to ensure homelessness does not become a recurring or long-term issue in children's lives.

Embedded in our work is a housing first philosophy that ensures families entering emergency shelter are quickly and compassionately connected to the right resources and housing to limit the toxic stress of homelessness on children and the family. We strive to create supportive and caring environments for children and families to make the positive and lasting changes they want to create better in their lives and their families.

Our vision of building a community where no child or family is homeless requires collective action. We work collaboratively with our partner agencies and rely on our funders, stakeholders, donors and all of community to help us achieve our goals and to ensure families experiencing or at risk of homelessness are provided the necessary resources to succeed. We work collaboratively within the family homeless-serving system of care to leverage our resources and eliminate duplication of efforts.

Often, our work to support a family begins before they arrive at our shelter doors. When a family calls prior to arriving, we focus on connecting them to other services and agencies to prevent the loss of their existing housing. When a family arrives at our doors, their housing is already lost. When there is no recourse but to enter shelter, we focus on the provision of emergency shelter and basic needs such as nutritious meals and snacks, as well as ensuring children and families have access to medical care, case management, early childhood and youth development programs, education and job training supports. These programs are designed to mitigate against the toxic stress inherent in homelessness and to ensure children and their care-givers have access to vital supports that will be of long-term benefit while in shelter and also once housed.

Our mission is to assist children and families achieving independence.

We cannot do it alone.

To help us build a community where no child or family is homeless, please visit our website.

www.innfromthecold.org