



Definition of

Indigenous Homelessness

in Canada

About The Definition's Design

The colour scheme (red, black, white and yellow) and the representation of the colours as the four directions are used on the cover and within this report to embody significant meanings that exist within First Nations, Métis and Inuit Indigenous cultures.

A central philosophy for many Indigenous Peoples is connectedness. Across Indigenous cultures, the circle serves as a recurring shape that represents interconnectivity, as seen with Indigenous medicine wheels and the Indigenous perspective of “All My Relations.” This is the circle of life.

“All My Relations” is represented by the circular placement of the fireweed, sweetgrass and mayflowers. It is a phrase that encompasses the view that all things are connected, linked to their families, communities, the lands that they inhabit and the ancestors who came before them. Therefore, all beings—animate and inanimate—are viewed as worthy of respect and care and in possession of a purpose are related.

Fireweed is a symbol of Indigenous resistance and perseverance; it is also used as a medicine by many Indigenous cultures across Turtle Island. Its young shoots provide springtime nourishment, its mature stems provide a tough fibre for string and nets, and its flowers produce sweet nectar for bees and other insects. Fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*) grows virtually everywhere in North America, as does sweetgrass (*Hierochloa odorata*) and so these plants were chosen to represent of all three Indigenous Peoples. Moreover, braided sweetgrass is burned as an incense in various Indigenous ceremonies and can be counted as one of the most sacred medicines of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples on Turtle Island. It is still widely traded and used as a gift.

The deep red-purple of the fireweed signifies success and resistance during challenging times, as this particular flower blooms in summer, but the shoots emerge at the end of the winter season when the remnants of snow are still around.

The greyish-white mayflower is representative of Euro-style colonial settlement, as the first successful colony of English settlers in North America was aboard the Mayflower galleon. Mayflowers, despite their colonial representation, do have a spot within the circle of All My Relations – Algonquin, Cherokee, and Haudenosaunee Peoples have long used mayflowers (*Epigaea repens*) as medicine for kidney disorders, arthritis and relieving pain during childbirth. Therefore, mayflower, as depicted in the circle, represents both the invasive and destructive aspects of settlement, as well as hope because it can be incorporated into the relationship web of All My Relations for its pre-colonial uses to Indigenous Peoples.

About The Definition's Design

Black, yellow, white and red are the four Indigenous colours commonly displayed in a well-known Indigenous medicine wheel. These four colours are often divided into four quadrants and hold meanings that are linked to the seven aspects of life's specific stages: four directions, four elements of life, four medicines, four seasons, and four stages of well-being. The yellow and red placements of the colours throughout the definition work are explicit in graphics. The white and black, however, are implicit and are represented in the white of the background and the black of the texts. The white and the black colours of the medicine wheel literally carry the message of Indigenous Homelessness and articulate it to the world with the help of the red and yellow accents; therefore, the document itself is the medicine wheel.

The placement of the title in its off-centre position was done intentionally, to signify that Indigenous experiences of homelessness are counter to the interconnectivity that is so central to Indigenous cultures. Indigenous individuals who are without home and shelter have been symbolically, as in their lived experiences of homelessness, displaced from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, their cultures, languages and identities.

Sources:

<https://www.ictinc.ca/about-team>

<http://firstnationspedagogy.com/interconnection.html>

<http://ojibweresources.weebly.com/medicine-wheel.html>

<https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/what-is-an-aboriginal-medicine-wheel>

Author: Jesse A. Thistle

© 2017 Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press



This research paper is protected under a Creative Commons license that allows you to share, copy, distribute, and transmit the work for non-commercial purposes, provided you attribute it to the original source.

How to cite this document: Thistle, J. (2017.) *Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

Special Acknowledgements:

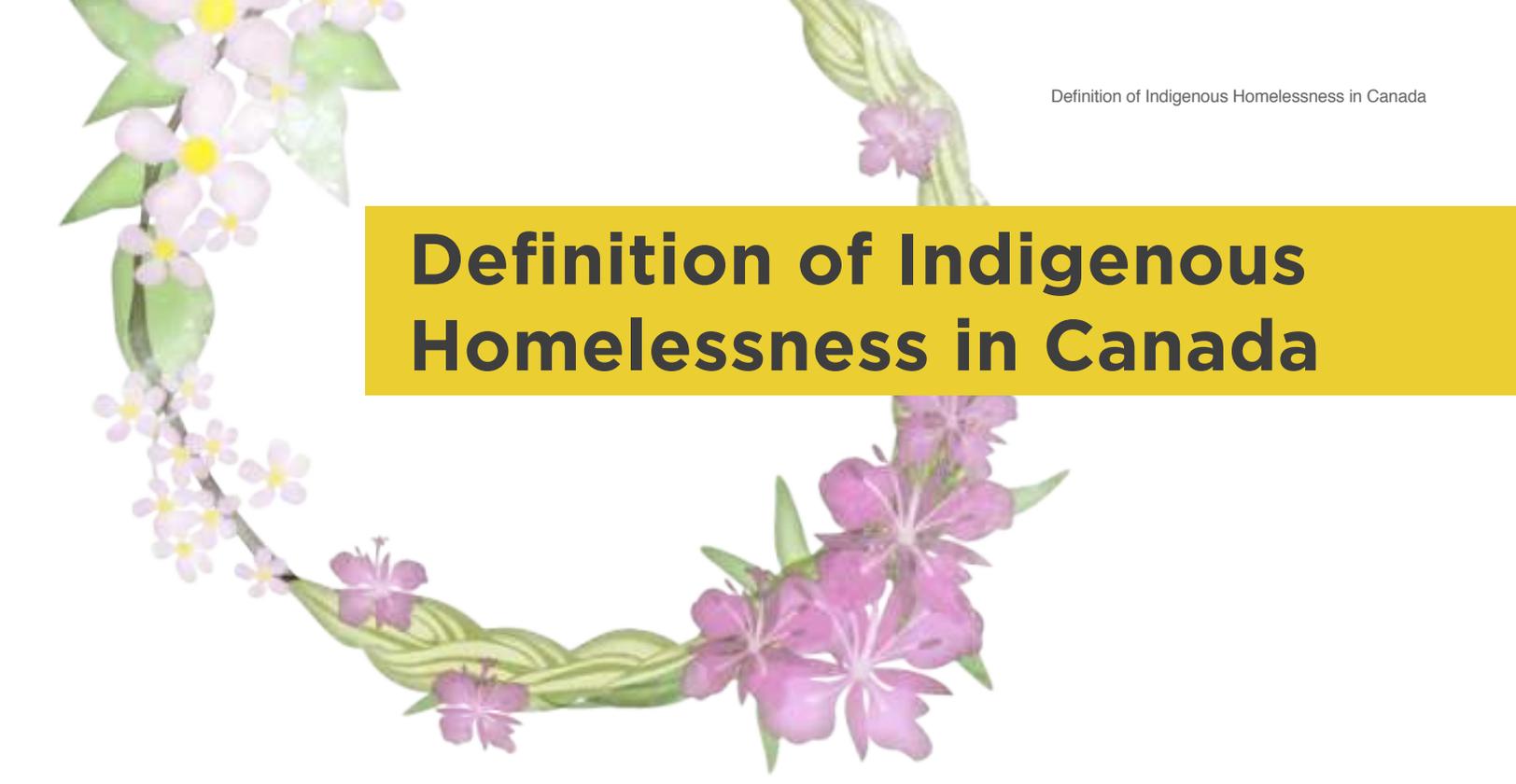
Althea Guiboche, Eric Weissman, Cyndy Baskin and Beverly Allard provided an abundance of concepts, ideas, and understandings throughout all phases of writing this definition. Their knowledge, writing skills, and input were invaluable and represents the core contributions of this piece.

Contribution Acknowledgements:

The people listed below were part of the consultation the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness undertook with Indigenous scholars, community members, knowledge keepers and Elders during the 18 months (January 2, 2016 to August 3, 2017) the National Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada was developed. There were three levels of consultation: 1) The National Steering Committee; 2) The Regional Advisors Committee; and 3) The National Elders Council. Contributions ranged from brief suggestions to extensive input, but all were valued, and we gratefully acknowledge the time and ideas of all contributors.

Alicia Campney, Stephen Gaetz, Yale Belanger, Suzanne Stewart, Patrick Stewart, Cindy Sue McCormack, Marcel Swain, David Newhouse, Susan McGee, Wendy Wetland, Julia Christensen, Chris Andersen, Janine Manning, Kaitlin Schwan, Al Day, David T. McNab, Donna Dolson, Steve Teekins, Ashley Quinn, Lori Mishibinijima, Rene Timlick, Susan Barberstock, Gregory Phillips, Neal McLeod, Ruth Koleszar-Green, Carole Leclair, Irene Goodwin, Jocelyn Murphy, Danielle Woodcock, Sheryl Lindsay, Tamon Scarlett, Patricia Farr, Elaine Brindley, Maha Hussain, Rose Gutierrez, Marie Wilson, Justin Wiebe, Catherine Longboat, Crystal Sinclair, Robynn Sadler, Erica Gray, Jason Leblanc, Amy Desjarlais, Sarah Zell, Scott McCullough, Jennifer St. Germaine, Randy Pitawanakwat, Katie Mysak, Robynn Maluga, Ralph Thistle, Pahan Pte San Win, Belinda Vandenbroeck, and 10 others who preferred not to be named.

Layout & design by: Joss Frank / www.jossfrank.com



Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada

Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews.

I) The Definition

Indigenous homelessness is a human condition that describes **First Nations, Métis** and **Inuit** individuals, families or communities lacking stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means or ability to acquire such housing. Unlike the common colonialist definition of homelessness, Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews. These include: individuals, families and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities. Importantly, Indigenous people experiencing these kinds of homelessness cannot culturally, spiritually, emotionally or physically reconnect with their Indigeneity or lost relationships (Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness, 2012).

The complex interactions between these factors in Indigenous homelessness produce situations that intersect with the typology of four kinds of homelessness, as presented in the Canadian Definition of Homelessness. These include: Unsheltered, Emergency Sheltered, Provisionally Accommodated and At Risk of Homelessness. While aspects of these four categories are tied to current housing markets and the limited availability of affordable housing, Indigenous homelessness is not simply a response to such circumstances, but 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.

Colonization of Indigenous bodies, minds and lands has had the historic and contemporary effect of traumatizing generations of First Nations, Métis and Inuit by disrupting traditional and vital domestic and territorial systems of governance, and obliterating timeless institutions responsible for the socialization of Indigenous Peoples. Linguicide¹ (McCarty, Romero, & Zepeda, 2006), the calculated extermination of Indigenous languages, was the key tool employed by the Canadian state in the intentional undermining and, in some cases, destruction of essential Indigenous social systems, cultures and worldviews. This deep cultural destabilization has produced—and continues to produce—individual and community traumas, responsible for the disproportionate levels of mental, cognitive, behavioural, social and physical challenges faced by Indigenous individuals, families, communities and Nations (Christensen, 2013). This thorough, complex and intentional unravelling of traditional social and cultural systems, known as cultural genocide, has created and prolonged, and continues to perpetuate, Indigenous homelessness in Canada (Menzies, 2007; The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Racism and discrimination aimed at Indigenous peoples are firmly entrenched in Canadian society

The observable manifestations of intergenerational trauma in Indigenous Peoples, such as intemperance, addiction and street-engaged poverty, are incorrectly assumed to be causes of homelessness in popular and worldwide blame-the-victim discourses. Obscured behind these discourses are the historical processes and narrative prejudices practiced by the Canadian state and settler society that have produced Indigenous homelessness. Discourse about these processes disappears into myths about flawed Indigenous individuals: mental “illness,” substance abuse, recidivism, delinquency, and other myths.

Racism and discrimination aimed at Indigenous peoples are firmly entrenched in Canadian society, producing impenetrable systemic and societal barriers, such as a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, insufficient and culturally inappropriate health and education services, irrelevant and inadequate employment opportunities, and a crumbling infrastructure in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. The fiduciary abandonment of Indigenous communities by the state, which has greatly contributed to Indigenous homelessness, is manifested by chronic underfunding by the federal, provincial and territorial governments of Canada.

The key to understanding a healthy community, Indigenous or not, is appreciating that cultivation of the human spirit is grounded in emplaced networks of significance. Grounded emplacement gives positive meaning to individual and collective life in social groups and society as a whole, and produces a healthy “sense of place,” as well as a healthy sense of identity. Yet the ineffective political and economic conditions cited above contribute to an assault on the socio-cultural practices and confidence of Indigenous populations, which has made impossible a meaningful sense of emplacement necessary for dignified social experiences for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples within broader Canadian society. External and foreign factors contribute greatly to rural and urban Indigenous homelessness by neglecting and starving healthy Indigenous relationships—

personal, social, cultural, spiritual and political. These factors are not innate to Indigenous cultural practices; they are instead external and state driven, imposed on, rather than generated by, Indigenous cultural practices.

In addition to uprooting the material and social vectors of experience that predated colonialism, European-style settlement on Indigenous land has extended colonialism's attack on Indigenous Peoples through official policies such as the Indian Act, residential schools, the Métis scrip system, Inuit relocations, and the encroachment and management of national and provincial parks (Sandlos, 2011), among others.

These policies, as well as unfulfilled treaties, physically displaced First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples into unviable, marginal geographic spaces. In these scattered urban and rural ghettos—considered by some to function similarly to African systems of apartheid—poverty, poor housing and economic disadvantage have become normalized.

In some of these marginalized reserve and community spaces, Indigenous Peoples have managed to prosper, but they are a small minority, and most people continue to experience great marginalization in these geographic and social settings. Contemporary Indigenous Homelessness can therefore be understood only by recognizing the injustice that undergirds these settlements and broken treaties (Peters & Robillard, 2009).

*Canadians
must finally
agree on some
difficult truths...*

Canadians must finally agree on some difficult truths:

1. Indigenous people do not choose to be homeless;
2. The experience is negative, stressful and traumatic;
3. Homelessness itself forces a disproportionate number of Indigenous people into activities deemed criminal by the state; and
4. The higher mortality rate in First Nations, Métis and Inuit has been ignored too long.

Lastly, and most importantly, because a lack of home, much as a sense of place or homeplace, is a culturally understood experience, we must develop and recognize an Indigenous definition of homelessness that must inform policy-making to solve the tragedy of Indigenous homelessness.

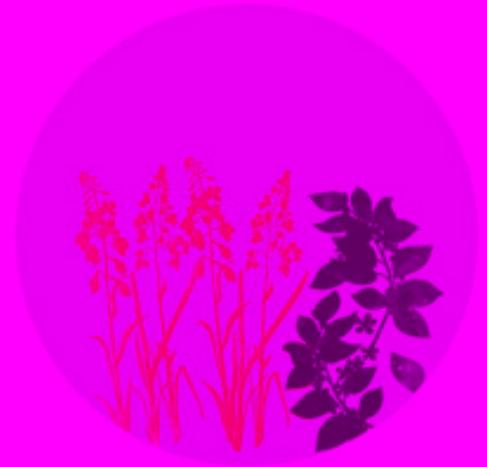


The 12 dimensions of Indigenous Homelessness

as articulated by Indigenous Peoples
across Canada

Historic Displacement Homelessness

Indigenous communities and Nations made historically homeless after being displaced from pre-colonial Indigenous lands.



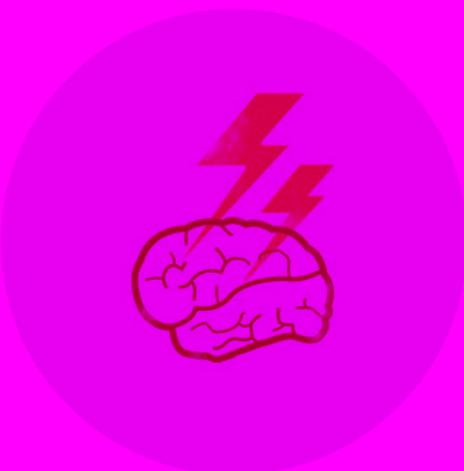
Contemporary Geographic Separation Homelessness

An Indigenous individual's or community's separation from Indigenous lands, after colonial control.



Spiritual Disconnection Homelessness

An Indigenous individual's or community's separation from Indigenous worldviews or connection to the Creator or equivalent deity.



Mental Disruption and Imbalance Homelessness

Mental homelessness, described as an imbalance of mental faculties, experienced by Indigenous individuals and communities caused by colonization's entrenched social and economic marginalization of Indigenous Peoples.

Cultural Disintegration and Loss Homelessness

Homelessness that totally dislocates or alienates Indigenous individuals and communities from their culture and from the relationship web of Indigenous society known as “All My Relations.”



Overcrowding Homelessness

The number of people per dwelling in urban and rural Indigenous households that exceeds the national Canadian household average, thus contributing to and creating unsafe, unhealthy and overcrowded living spaces, in turn causing homelessness.

Relocation and Mobility Homelessness

Mobile Indigenous homeless people travelling over geographic distances between urban and rural spaces for access to work, health, education, recreation, legal and childcare services, to attend spiritual events and ceremonies, have access to affordable housing, and to see family, friends and community members.

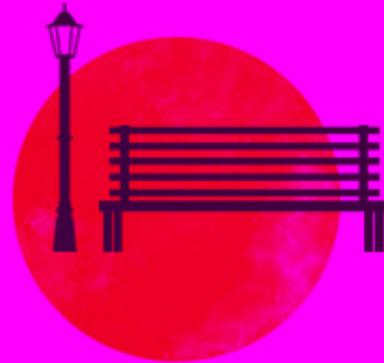


Going Home Homelessness

An Indigenous individual or family who has grown up or lived outside their home community for a period of time, and on returning “home,” are often seen as outsiders, making them unable to secure a physical structure in which to live, due to federal, provincial, territorial or municipal bureaucratic barriers, uncooperative band or community councils, hostile community and kin members, lateral violence and cultural dislocation.

Nowhere to Go Homelessness

A complete lack of access to stable shelter, housing, accommodation, shelter services or relationships; literally having nowhere to go.



Escaping or Evading Harm Homelessness

Indigenous persons fleeing, leaving or vacating unstable, unsafe, unhealthy or overcrowded households or homes to obtain a measure of safety or to survive. Young people, women, and LGBTQ2S people are particularly vulnerable.



Emergency Crisis Homelessness

Natural disasters, large-scale environmental manipulation and acts of human mischief and destruction, along with bureaucratic red tape, combining to cause Indigenous people to lose their homes because the system is not ready or willing to cope with an immediate demand for housing.²

Climatic Refugee Homelessness

Indigenous peoples whose lifestyle, subsistence patterns and food sources, relationship to animals, and connection to land and water have been greatly altered by drastic and cumulative weather shifts due to climate change. These shifts have made individuals and entire Indigenous communities homeless.

