

When a **HOUSE** is Not a **HOME**

Investigating Spiritual
Homelessness in Indigenous
Populations of Calgary



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Preface

In September 2021, I was offered the opportunity to take part in the Catamount Fellowship - a research and community based program for emerging changemakers. The Fellowship is offered through the Institute of Community Prosperity and partners with various community organisations and members of faculty to investigate and collaborate on a social issue through a systems thinking lens. As a 4th-year business and social innovation student, this was a chance to put three years of training into practice and see how social innovation principles could be applied in the real world to real problems.

I was partnered with Brookfield Residential and asked to investigate homelessness among families, veterans, and seniors. This is a huge topic, and one that requires more research before settling on a research question that fits in the scope of the Fellowship. Using resources such as annual reports from homeless shelters and digging deeper into news sources showed that **in terms of homelessness in Calgary, Indigenous single-parent families are most at risk** (Inn From the Cold, 2020). While contemplating this issue, another presented itself - that of culture and belonging. When homeless Indigenous families are housed, how do they begin to feel at home? Homelessness is a massive issue worldwide, but there are differences in how it is experienced and defined by different groups. So often, the idea of homelessness is seen through a settler narrative and does not take into account the role of place and culture in defining or understanding what a home is. This caused a change in the scope of research from simply homelessness to something deeper - that of belonging. Given this fascinating topic, the aim of this report is to highlight

How might community and industry work together to foster belonging in housing for Indigenous families?

Methods

The research for this report was conducted between September 2021 and March 2022, using a combination of digital and print resources and a mixture of academic literature, annual reports and other findings, newspaper articles, and books. Additional sources of information include weekly Catamount Fellow Gatherings, a facilitated community conversation, a personal interview, and meetings with my community partner and faculty mentor.

1. Problem

In order to understand the root of the problem, it is first necessary to delve into the historical treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada. The legacies of racist policies can be seen today in the treatment of Indigenous residents in their housing, in the attitudes Canadians hold, and the lasting disassociation from cultural identities leading to lasting intergenerational trauma.

1.1 History

The Constitution Act (1982) defines the aboriginal peoples of Canada as including the Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

Since 1876, The Indian Act has governed the interactions, rights, and government of Indigenous peoples in Canada. The original role of the Act was to promote ideas of assimilation and cultural annihilation - to eliminate Indigenous culture and life (Government of Canada, 1985). In terms of housing, the Act provides clear instruction on where and how Indigenous Peoples may be housed, including geographic limitations. While being critically outdated, The Act is still a key component of how Indigenous peoples are perceived Canada-wide. The impact of the Act cannot be understated when it comes to how Indigenous peoples have been treated by the Canadian government and provides a framework for understanding why spiritual and cultural needs are so rarely met.

One of the lasting legacies of the Indian Act is that of residential schools and on-reserve housing. Residential schools were a government policy which removed Indigenous children from their homes in order to remove their heritage and culture and assimilate them into proper "Canadians." The last residential school closed in 1996, and therefore is very relevant in the discussion surrounding connection and belonging.

In terms of housing, what is provided on reserve is often Western in nature and does not take into account how Indigenous families live and spend their time. Often the housing provided on reserve is too small, or not designed in a way that allows for ceremony and gathering. In addition, access to basic resources such as clean water



may be lacking (Chambers 2021). While the federal government has made promises of improvement, there is still a severe lack of availability when it comes to housing, healthcare and education, and water. Given these issues, it is no surprise that many Indigenous people may feel as though they must leave their rural and remote communities to pursue opportunities in larger urban centres, but even then it may be difficult to find appropriate housing (William et al, 2017).

Internationally, 2007 marked the release of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The UNDRIP consists of 46 articles, and acknowledges the rights of Indigenous peoples worldwide, including the right to housing and cultural identity (United Nations, 2007). While Canada has endorsed the Declaration, the federal government has been slow to enact meaningful change when it comes to specific recommendations. However, there has been ongoing work by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and in 2015, their report was published. This report outlines the steps the Canadian government must take towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and the effects of colonisation on those populations (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Similar to the UNDRIP, while the government does acknowledge the need for change, it has been slow to show meaningful support. As of 2021, September 30 has been declared as the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (Government of Canada, 2021).

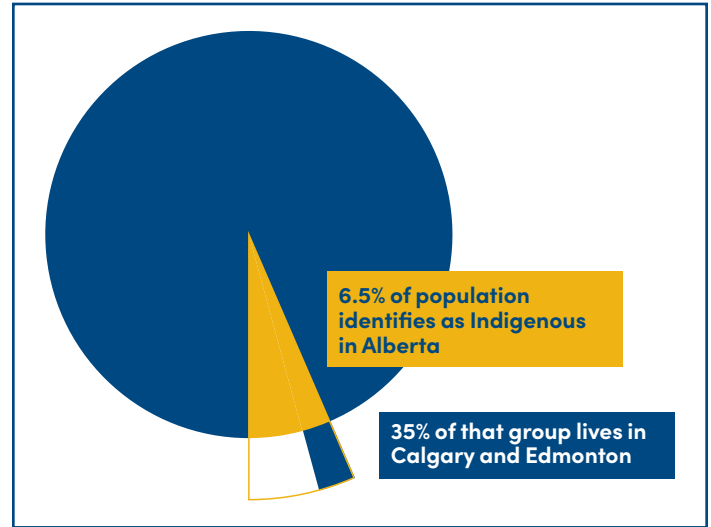
1.2 Homelessness in Urban Environments

In Alberta, roughly 6.5% of the population identifies as Indigenous and 35% of that group lives in the large urban centres of Calgary and Edmonton (Statistics Canada, 2017). While specific information was difficult to find, Thistle (2017) suggests that urban Indigenous peoples are **8 times more likely to be homeless than the general population**. However, homelessness is more than simply lacking a home - in this case it also refers to lack of connection with spiritual, cultural, emotional and spiritual elements that are a core part of being Indigenous (Thistle, 2017). Memmott and Chambers (2008) refer to this as 'spiritual homelessness', a reference to how cultural disconnection leads to continued feelings of loneliness and isolation. This speaks to a larger issue than simply finding a place to live - a home needs to be a place of connection and community, not just a roof and four walls.

In 2008, the City of Calgary released a plan to eliminate homelessness within ten years (Turner et al, 2018). While ambitious, this plan was not successful in its aim of elimination. There were several reasons why, including the onset of a global recession and reduction of expected funding. However, it did reduce homelessness in the city through various methods, showing that sustained collaborative methods can work. This may be an area to explore further, specifically in the context of housing for urban Indigenous families in the wake of COVID-19.

1.3 Culture, or loss thereof

Culture is a key component of belonging and mental well-being. Gone (2013) argues that access to culture is an important factor of healing from intergenerational trauma. This is a vital piece in the question of how to create belonging in the context of Canadian Indigenous housing, as it suggests that the lack of cultural belonging creates self-perpetuating cycles that lead to increased vulnerability.



Spiritual Homelessness

A state arising from: (a) separation from traditional land, (b) separation from family and kinship networks, or (c) crisis of personal identity wherein one's understanding or knowledge of how one relates to country, family and Aboriginal identity systems is confused.

2. Systems

Systems-thinking is more than simply creating networks between actors. A system examines the parts of a greater whole and places them into context. It allows us to examine the interrelationships between these parts, to consider where and how we can create change. In the context of Indigenous homelessness, a systems-thinking approach allows us to consider what feeds into the current problem. So often when problem-solving, it can be tempting to look at the issue in isolation. This can lead to solutions that do not address the root causes - in this case we must consider how historic policies and beliefs have impacted the current problem.

At the end of February 2022, I hosted a community conversation to gain insight into how the community defined cultural belonging in housing. The responses, including members from housing organisations, were an interesting insight into what creates belonging. There were several highlights that came from this event, but primary among them were to identify both stakeholders and the systems at play. I spoke to some within the community as well, to gain perspective on the actual needs of Indigenous residents in regards to their housing. Finally, meeting with both my faculty mentor and community partner allowed me to explore and expand upon ideas and make connections that would have been beyond the scope of one person. These conversations provided valuable feedback in the development of this system. The systems at play are massive and identify this issue as a 'wicked problem,' something that is incredibly complex to solve and involves cooperation between several institutions, industries, and groups (I think this is Westley - check SI reference database).

2.1 Identifying Stakeholders

There were four key stakeholders identified in the discussion of housing, all of whom are connected. The strengths of these connections vary, but are all important in some way when it comes to how housing is administered and used. They are:

- **Residents** - those who live in housing. It includes not only Indigenous residents but also those who share space in the same place. This category includes renters in addition to individual homeowners.
- **Landlords and property managers** - those who manage the housing which indigenous residents live in. Landlords are more likely to live off-site, while property managers usually live on-site or nearby, and are more likely to handle day-to-day operations such as rent collection, leasing, and property maintenance.
- **Developers/Owners** - those who own the housing stock. This includes housing organisations and companies along a spectrum from residential to commercial, such as Calgary Housing and Brookfield Residential. This category encompasses a broad range, including organizations that develop property and those who convert it for other uses, as well as their management staff.
- **Government** - Overseeing entities, such as municipal, provincial and federal entities. This can include various departments within the City of Calgary, Province of Alberta, or Government of Canada.
- **Nonprofits and other organisations** - This can include organisations that promote cultural events such as the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary, and those that help residents find long-term housing such as the Calgary Homeless Foundation, Trellis, Metis Family Services, and campus-based Indigenous housing.



This journey map answers some of these key questions that arose over course of research:

- What is holding the system in place?
- What is hidden?
- Where are the branches?
- Where and how do we lose people?



2.2 Systems in place

The system at play here in respect to Indigenous housing services is very complex. As mentioned above, a key component of this system is the history of colonisation and its lasting impact on Indigenous lives. This underlies all of the other structures of the system, from access to housing, racism, and cultural disconnect. To better understand how these systems reinforce each other, see the systems/journey map on the following page and attached guide.

Racism is an important aspect of this conversation - it is present in our lives, in our systems, and our legislation. It is the result of historic policy and ingrained cultural ideas of who Indigenous people are, how they behave, and the expectations of behaviour. While there is some change in attitudes, there is still an underlying tension that can be seen in Canadian society. This includes encounters with law enforcement, other residents of housing communities, and social services (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). These concerns extend to the micro level as well, in the way that landlords and property owners interact with Indigenous families, creating barriers to safe housing and overall security (Williamson et al, 2017).

3. Gaps and Levers

Where there is space, there is room for change and innovation. The research has identified three main gaps in how housing and culture are connected: lack of understanding the generational needs of Indigenous residents, lack of funding towards systems change, and gaps in access in regards to community and culture.

3.1 Understanding

There is a clear disconnect between the housing provided and the housing needed. As mentioned above, current housing stock is very western in nature - it breeds disconnection and individual needs over collective. Some ideas for how to change or adapt housing to meeting Indigenous cultural and familial needs include:

- Single-level living, for ease of movement
- Inclusivity and community in renting
- Area for ceremony and ability to smudge
- Communal/Shared spaces
- Space for cooking, eating and socialising

However, the key idea that came up again and again was that of making sure that **landlords are culturally aware and willing to build relationships with their Indigenous tenants**. Unfortunately, research by Belanger (2007) has shown that many landlords are unwilling to rent to Indigenous people due to poor past experiences. If we can shift this idea, then it will lead to better experiences for all, and encourage housing security for landlords and tenants.

In terms of designing space that meets the needs of Indigenous residents, it is important to understand that there is often a lack of opportunity for those within the Indigenous community to access the needed education they may require to create such changes. These needed roles could include home builders, city planners, housing advocates, and architects - those who can provide input from their lived experiences. The lack of Indigenous people in these roles has created what is known as a "data gap" or "unknown unknown" - the idea that we don't know what we are missing because we did not know what we could not know due to these gaps.

3.2 Funding

As of this writing, there are two major programs which focus on Indigenous housing in Alberta. One is federal - The National Housing Strategy (NHS), which was developed in 2017 and has set aside \$40 billion dollars

to develop housing strategies for Indigenous peoples, and to honour the Canadian government's commitment to reconciliation. The other program is run through the Province of Alberta, and is known as the Indigenous Housing Capital Program (IHCP). Both programs show that the government is willing to invest in reconciliation, but due to their relative newness, information on how the NHS and IHCP have been utilised is not currently accessible. A key success factor in the impact and success of these programs is that of education and cultural sensitivity on the part of program administrators - there is currently no data on the demographic makeup of these administrators.

3.3 Community and Culture

As mentioned above, the current housing stock does not address the needs of diverse families. There is a decided lack of culturally appropriate programming for Indigenous peoples, regardless of their housing status (Fiske, Belanger, & Gregory, 2010). Unfortunately, this lack further contributes to feelings of shame, and anger. Due to urbanisation, many Indigenous peoples may live far from their reserves and cultural lands, and be separated from their families and sense of community. Due to issues with infrastructure, they may not be able to connect with those at home. When 76% of rural Indigenous households do not have access to high-speed internet, it is challenging to stay connected with family, resulting in isolation and loneliness (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2016). Belanger and Lindstrom (2021) suggest that there are strong feelings of isolation because urban Indigenous residents may feel as though they cannot return to the reserve but also do not fit into the city.

Emotions that people may feel about their lack of connection:



3.4 Leverage Points

All of the above provide opportunities for shifting the system, although some may be more effective than others. Understanding may be a clear first step, as it can be implemented as a strategy on an organisational level, or even piloted at specific residences to test strategies and obtain feedback. This can easily transition into culture and community through the creation of culturally focused events and opportunities.

4. Solutions

Opportunities for change abound. My research unearthed many fascinating ideas, however here I have identified two solutions that, with proper implementation, can create a greater sense of belonging for Indigenous peoples in housing. The first is Calgary-specific, and involves the renovation of unused downtown office space into low-income housing in collaboration with local Indigenous organisations. The second focuses on the institutional level - by creating change through cultural training and sensitivity for staff, including consulting with Indigenous elders and residents to ensure that their specific cultural needs are being met.

4.1 Unused Office Space and Community Collaboration

In Calgary, some property owners have begun to convert under-utilised office space into affordable housing as a result of reduced use during the Covid-19 pandemic (CBC News, 2021). These spaces have been empty for years now, and this redevelopment will create increased availability and affordability for those in need of transitional housing. Something that has not been discussed however, is adding additional services to these homes. One potential avenue is to work in collaboration with other organisations to foster greater connection with cultural roots. While there is some institutional collaboration currently taking place, this is an area that could benefit from continued work. Community developers such as Brookfield Residential have begun to create stakeholder groups with Indigenous communities, which is a route that other organizations could consider, especially in more densely populated areas. An ideal organisation for this is the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary, which could provide culturally relevant support for those living in office space housing. Another consideration is that of space and meaning - Indigenous ideas of crowding are very different from western ideas. By partnering with an already established community organisation these spaces will take into account the needs of their Indigenous residents and be able to proactively consider their policies and procedures.

4.2 Training and Culture

Falvo (2021) suggests several methods of engaging those involved in the management and governance of housing in regards to cultural awareness. The first is that of creating opportunities for cultural events organised by Indigenous residents which could be hosted by members of the community. The second is to create training programs for staff in which they learn about the unique needs of their residents (both present and future) and the broader community to understand how to meet those needs in a culturally sensitive way. Another is for organizations to consider greater diversity in hiring - hiring Indigenous employees will allow for greater sensitivity and cultural awareness, especially in regards to how communities can be build and the types of programs offered to residents. The final strategy is to create community groups that allow for a greater conversation around the needs of the community. Change needs to come from a group, not be forced upon it. It is incredibly important that as interested groups work to address the needs of Indigenous residents, they do not make assumptions about what they should do.

5. Conclusion

This topic is bigger than one person. It is bigger than one group of people. Homelessness, cultural identity and belonging are more than buzzwords, more than media pieces, and more than one report or business can solve. This is a collective issue, and the only way to solve it is collectively, through collaboration with various stakeholders and a commitment to hearing the stories of Indigenous people. This paper hardly skims the surface of how housing, culture, and belonging are related - there is especially a further need for Indigenous scholars in this area.

Below, I have highlighted some potential areas for further research and consideration - I believe these topics have the opportunity to help create better, more inclusive housing solutions.

- Promotion of natural supports as a core aspect of Indigenous Housing Strategy.
- Collaborations with the Indigenous community in building new housing stock to ensure the best experiences for all involved.
- Increased cultural training opportunities for staff and other residents.

6. Reflection

I am not a member of the Indigenous community - my family immigrated to Canada from India in the 1960s and 1980s. However, we come from India, an area which struggles with its own post-colonial impacts. In taking part in this project, I found myself reflecting on how my family, and my people, show their culture. Canada is a diverse country and yet it can be very difficult to find others of the same background. There is a cultural idea of who an East Indian person is, and that affects how we connect with each other. Similarly, there are more than 630 First Nations communities in Canada, with different traditions, rituals, and spiritual needs. This fellowship has shown me how different cultures can truly be very similar, and how to keep an open mind in the stories from others. It could have been very easy to centre myself in this story and to say that all colonised nations must be helped in the same way. To do so would have been to ignore our differences and focus on the easy and familiar. **We need to look for the things that pull us together, instead of what pushes us apart.**

This has been an intensely uncomfortable journey at times. The Catamount Fellowship has forced me to address my biases, worldview, and understanding. It has caused late night debates, and early morning reading sessions. It has caused me to constantly question myself, including my goals as both a changemaker and an academic. I have felt pushed to the brink at times, and like I should give up - what does one person have to offer on a topic so large? What do I have to offer? Prior to the fellowship, I never thought about homelessness or culture. I had never considered the systems that are founded in colonial policy and still affect the lives of people today. It is an undeniable truth that this analysis is incomplete - no one can know everything about a topic. But I do hope that this report provides a starting point. We all start somewhere. It's where we end up that matters.

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