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# Displacement, Housing and Homelessness in Northern Manitoba Communities

By C. Lee Anne Deegan and  
Marleny M. Bonnycastle

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>1</b>	<b>Abstract</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>History of Housing in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and Thompson, Manitoba</b>
	Housing in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation
	Housing in Thompson
<b>9</b>	<b>Literature Review</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Methodology</b>
	Participants
	Elders and Indigenous Protocols
	Food
	Ethics
	Research Process
	<i>Data Generation and Analysis</i>
	<i>Data Analysis</i>
	<i>Knowledge Sharing</i>
	Limitations
<b>17</b>	<b>Findings</b>
	Homeless Lived Experience
	<i>Relationships</i>
	<i>Housing</i>
	<i>Impact of Colonialism and Racism at Different Levels</i>
	<i>Domestic Violence and Abuse</i>
	<i>Services, Programs and Supports</i>
	Focus Groups
	Voices of Those with Lived Experience
	<i>Relationships</i>
	<i>Housing</i>
	<i>Impact of Colonialism</i>
	<i>Services, Programs and Supports</i>
	Focus Groups with Service Providers
	<i>Relationships</i>
	<i>Housing</i>
	<i>Impact of Colonialism</i>
	<i>Services, Programs and Supports</i>
	Community Cafés in Thompson and Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation
	Summary of Findings
<b>43</b>	<b>Analysis, Interpretation of Findings &amp; Discussion</b>
<b>46</b>	<b>Conclusions and Recommendations</b>
<b>48</b>	<b>References</b>
<b>54</b>	<b>Appendix A: The 12 Dimensions of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada</b>

## **Figures**

- 13 Figure 1 – Research Process
- 14 Figure 2 – Visual Symbols used for Interviews
- 15 Figure 3 – Categories and Themes
- 16 Figure 4 – Community Café
- 18 Figure 5 – Findings
- 36 Figure 6 – Challenges: NCN Focus Groups & Community Café
- 37 Figure 7 – Future Directions: NCN Focus Groups and Community Café
- 38 Figure 8 – Important Programs and Services in NCN and Thompson
- 40 Figure 9 – Challenges: Thompson Focus Groups and Community Café
- 41 Figure 10 – Future Directions: Thompson Focus Groups and Community Café
- 44 Figure 11 – Interlocking of Findings Thompsons & NCN

# Abstract

Indigenous people<sup>1</sup> are overrepresented among the homeless population in the northern region of Manitoba and the factors that are contributing to their homelessness and restraining their movement out of homelessness in urban and remote communities in the north are not well understood. The main focus of the research was to explore the understanding of people with lived experience of housing instability and homelessness in order to deepen awareness and improve conditions for people in the region.

This research was developed in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and Thompson, Manitoba from 2018–2020. Using Community Based Participatory Research as our foundation we used participatory methods including interviews, focus groups and community cafés.

Participants attributed people’s mobility from their communities and into homelessness in the

region to housing issues, limitations of services, racism, impacts of colonization and domestic violence. The study shows several gaps identified by participants that included limited housing options, inadequate housing conditions, lack of supports, services and resources for children, youth, women and families, long waiting lists for affordable housing, and lack of coordination of services. Our main recommendation is to create mechanisms to promote more collaborative work for programs and services and housing along with a regional plan for housing. In addition, it would be helpful to develop a database of organizations, services, programs and resources that is accessible to the public. Participants also recognized the need for a broader conversation in the region about housing and the importance of providing services that respond to the genuine needs of Indigenous people.

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<sup>1</sup>The terms Indigenous will be used throughout this paper. Indigenous is a broad term denoting people have a history and connection to lands and who have been impacted by displacement. See <https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/>

# Introduction

Many indigenous peoples are subjected to homelessness and its life-threatening conditions, to grossly inadequate housing that lacks even the most basic services, such as potable water and toilets, and to forced evictions and involuntary displacement — all egregious violations of the right to housing (*United Nations, 2019*)

Research on homelessness in Thompson and northern Manitoba communities is still relatively new. However, since 2015 the University of Manitoba, Northern Social Work Program and the University College of the North, Faculty of Arts, Science and Business have led several studies that have contributed to increasing awareness about homelessness there. The idea for this project emerged from a wish to shift the narrative about people who are homeless in Thompson and in the surrounding communities from focusing on individual factors to recognition of the structural issues that are widely acknowledged as the root causes for homelessness among Indigenous peoples. A primary goal of the research was to explore the experiences of people with lived experience of housing instability and homelessness and their understanding of their situations and

needs in order to deepen awareness and improve conditions for people in the region.

The study was conducted from July 2018 through February 2020. The design of this research attempted to identify aspects of people's experiences navigating housing, homelessness, and services in Thompson and in their communities. We also wanted to hear participants' ideas about how communities can respond more effectively to housing instability and homelessness. The main objectives of this project were to:

1. Document the reasons the people experiencing homelessness give for leaving their communities to move to urban centres.
2. Explore the factors that are facilitating homelessness and restraining the movement out of homelessness in urban communities in the north.
3. Explore participants' ideas on how to prevent and reduce homelessness of northern Manitoba.

We used Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) methods (Israel et al., 2008). Data was generated through interviews using visual methods, focus groups and community cafés.

Twenty-two participants with experience of homelessness were recruited and interviewed from July 2018 through to March 2019. We used visual methods along with audio recording in the interviews, primarily with those with lived experience of homelessness. Engagement with Indigenous people and services providers was sought in both communities. Focus groups were held with 28 people and included both those with lived experience and service providers. The community cafés were held with 25 people, including service providers and those with lived experience

All but one of the participants in the interviews were originally from one of eleven communities in the northern region. We used thematic analysis and NVivo 12 to analyze data. Six main themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups: Housing, impact of colonization and racism at different levels, domestic violence and abuse, issues about services, programs and supports, and relationships. Focus groups and community cafés were then used to validate the preliminary analysis of data.

Participants were volunteers who declared themselves as individuals with homelessness experience. Although the purpose of this research was not to seek people's definitions of home and homelessness, it is important to acknowledge several participants expressed their concerns about the 'homeless' term and shared the view that they themselves or their community members were not homeless, even that the shelter in Thompson should not be labelled homeless. Their sense of home appeared to be located in their relationships and connections to the land versus having a structure to live in.

There have been similar findings in research projects in Canada and Australia where household composition, kinship obligations and mobility have been discussed as cultural relational patterns (Christensen, 2013; Memmott, Long, Chambers, & Spring, 2003). These understandings are also

shared in The Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada (Thistle, 2017) and inform our understandings and use of the terms 'lived experience' and/or lived experience of homelessness. We are not just referring to people who are currently visibly homeless; we are describing those who have experienced one or more of the 12 dimensions identified in Thistle's *Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada* (see Appendix B).

The causes of Indigenous housing and homelessness issues are embedded in historical and ongoing processes of colonization. We begin by including sections on what is known about housing displacement and homelessness in northern and rural communities, focusing on the experience of Indigenous people in Thompson and NCN. We then share the methodology for the project. In the discussion of the findings we will share principal categories and themes that emerged in the interviews, focus groups and cafés that point to the precipitating factors and causes of housing instability and homelessness, along with the obstacles in the way of movement into housing in these communities and changes that are needed to prevent and end homelessness in the region.

This research study demonstrates the need to listen to the voice of people with lived experience and to work collaboratively among governments, agencies, and communities across the northern region. We recommend the creation of mechanisms to promote more collaborative work for programs and services and the development of housing along with a regional plan for improving housing conditions for Indigenous people in the region. In addition, a database of organizations, services, programs and resources that is accessible to the public would be helpful. Finally, there is a need for a broader conversation in the region about housing and the importance of providing services and housing that are the result of genuine reciprocal relations and responds to the genuine needs of Indigenous people.

# History of Housing in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and Thompson, Manitoba

## Housing in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation

Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN) community is located about 800 kilometers north of Winnipeg. This area of northern Manitoba has been home to the people of Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN) for thousands of years (Hultin, 2005; Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, 2016). Pre-colonially the people were nomadic and occupied several sites in the region associated with activities for gathering, fishing/hunting and ceremonies (Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, 2016). There is limited evidence of interactions between Nisichawayasihk Cree people and early settlers, but by the 1900s the Cree people faced an onslaught of infringements from these colonizing forces. Interference in their way of life began with the implementation of the Indian Act (1876), followed by their signing on to Treaty 5 in the early 1900s and the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement (NRTA) in 1930 (Kulchyski, 2004).

Colonialists displaced Indigenous people onto enforced settlements, imposed new governance structures on their communities, subjected individuals to criteria for their legal identity (status), and imperiled families through the forced removal of their children (Indigenous Foundations, 2009). As noted earlier, this process started

in the early 1900s in NCN (Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, 2016). Declining ability to sustain themselves and increasing government interference in community life and governance made it difficult for people to continue to build traditional homes. This compelled them to accept European designed houses that were ill fitted for their domestic needs and were poorly equipped for the local environment (Belanger, 2016).

Starting in the 1950s, mining and flooding in NCN and surrounding territories had devastating impacts on traditional lands. According to NCN, early hydro developments occurred without any consultation or compensation. The community did not obtain road access or hydroelectric power until the 1970s (Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, 2016). The arrival of the road is linked to significant changes in the life of people in the community. Further, the community did not obtain running water/sewer infrastructure until 1988. There has been some progress such as in 1996 when the federal government and Manitoba Hydro signed the Northern Flood Implementation Agreement which requires consultation and compensation for any new development (Sajid, 2016).

The housing that was imposed on NCN occurred in the context of federal/provincial pol-

icies. For most of the twentieth century Indigenous people “...were ineligible for mainstream programs — including the National Housing Act of 1938” (Belanger, 2016, p. 443). An additional barrier has been the interpretation of the British North America Act (BNA) where provinces are exempted from responding to Indigenous needs and concerns. Jurisdictional debates between the federal and provincial governments often “... leads to Aboriginal people being trapped in a jurisdictional void and unable to access analogous non-Aboriginal housing programs or homeless relief” (Belanger, 2016, p. 443). Belanger adds,

The problem in part lay with the Indian Act system that crafts Aboriginal separateness — a government edifice, it must be noted — and its murky character that relies on keeping Indian issues housed with a proven to be-inept federal ministry. It encourages provincial and territorial officials to abandon responsibility for Indian issues based on Constitutional paramountcy, which has proven injurious to any and all attempts made to improve reserve and off-reserve housing (2016, p. 447).

As discussed above, the federal government imposed European architecture on Indigenous communities, with little consideration for the people’s needs, wishes or the demands of the environment where it was being assembled (Belanger, 2016). There was also no planning for community growth or for responses to deterioration of the existing housing stock. In a recent evaluation, substandard housing (not enough rooms or mold) was high on the list of housing gaps (Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, 2017). The report states the condition of many houses in the community do not meet standards for foster care licensing or reuniting families whose children are under the care of child protection. In order to increase the availability of foster care and ensure families can return home the organization has had to use its own capital dollars to renovate some homes to meet standards.

Federal and provincial governments were and continue to be well aware of the ongoing housing crisis on reserves (Belanger, 2016; Harvey, 2016). There were some positive efforts in the 1960s and into the 1970s to ameliorate conditions, but again, there was no consideration of the people’s needs and planning for population growth and maintenance or repair, so another crisis arose again by the 1980s (Belanger, 2016). These conditions have resulted in unreasonably high rates of overcrowding which has provoked homelessness in these communities and is forcing migration to urban centres (Belanger, 2016; Loppie Reading & Wien, 2009). In sum, responses to the housing needs for those living on-reserve have mainly been ad-hoc and demand has constantly exceeded supply.

NCN has taken several steps recently to address housing issues in the community including a 2015 survey on housing, completed by 408 households in the community, shows that over 40% of the homes are overcrowded and 58.1% have mold problems (Nisichawayasihk Housing Authority, 2015). At the time of this research project (2020) NCN was working on a new strategic plan for housing in the community.

### Housing in Thompson

As yet there is limited information about the development of housing in Thompson and its impacts on Indigenous people, however, various research projects have touched on housing issues in the community and in the region. In the expansion of resource extraction in the Northern region of Manitoba colonial forces operated to not only constrain the movement and ability of the Indigenous people to operate according to their traditional way of life, but also to participate fully in the new economy (Chartrand & Bignell, 2017; Stott, 2017). In the 1950s nickel was discovered in the region and Thompson, Manitoba was built soon after (FemNorthNet Thompson Community Group, 2012). The city is located about

80 kilometers east of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation community and is located on their traditional lands. The early founders of the mine and the town, like in so many other communities in Canada, gave no consideration for the impacts of development on the local people.

Indigenous people's contributions to the building of the community were met with disregard, as evidenced in early policy at the mine and in the community (Chartrand & Bignell, 2017; Schulz & FemNorthNet Thompson Community Group, 2015; Stott, 2017). Stott (2017) described some of this history from an interview with an Elder in Thompson,

A large number of these men established a tent city in the bush beyond the town's train station, which had no official standing within the Thompson scheme. Several of the men were joined by their families. While some of these men found work in the initial building, the continued housing shortages and official discrimination meant that there was no room for them in the town itself, with the result that most First Nations people were essentially homeless. While jobs were sometimes available, many faced overt discrimination or racism that either barred them from taking up these positions or made them untenable (p. 31).

By the late 1960s increased awareness of the circumstances of Indigenous people in the communities surrounding Thompson led to employment policy changes. Still, there remained opposition to providing housing for Indigenous people in the Thompson community. For example, a Liberal MP argued housing was not a concern for Indigenous people living there in tents, as they were suitably accommodated in these encampments on the edge of the town (Chartrand & Bignell, 2017). Ongoing opposition to the inclusion of Indigenous people in the community was also demonstrated in a 1979 Human Rights complaint against several businesses in the town. The suit was provoked after t-shirts with discriminatory

imagery and wording were marketed by some businesses (Chartrand & Bignell, 2017).

The people endured and in the ensuing years Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation has made several efforts to increase participation in the community and has made several investments in Thompson. It first purchased the Mystery Lake Hotel in Thompson in 1998 and later purchased a grocery store. In May 2016, seven years after signing the Aboriginal Accord with the City of Thompson (City of Thompson, 2013), NCN has acquired reserve lands in Thompson, which includes the hotel, and where it has since built the NCN gas bar (Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, n.d.). NCN, along with several other Indigenous organizations, also provides child and family services and has several resources for its children and families in the community. Thus far, Nisichawayasihk has not developed housing in Thompson, but there are plans to build a new office complex on the urban reserve (Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, n.d.).

The Thompson Economic Diversification Working Group (TEDWG) created the city's first housing action plan in 2012. This TEDWG report discussed housing conditions in Thompson, including high costs, overcrowding in rental units and low vacancy rates. At that time the vacancy rate in Thompson was less than 1% and it was acknowledged there were significantly high rates of overcrowding and a shortfall in quality housing in Thompson (TEDWG, 2012). The report stated that 90% of the dwelling units in Thompson were more than twenty years old. It recognized the need for culturally appropriate affordable units for large families. The report also recognized that housing conditions in surrounding communities were significantly worse than in Thompson with regard to higher rates of overcrowding and core housing need in conjunction with very few options available for youth and young families (TEDWG, 2012).

The TEDWG report identified something of a continuum of needs in Thompson, from em-

ployee housing to transitional housing. However, much of the emphasis in the strategy was on market driven solutions (Schulz & FemNorthNet Thompson Community Group, 2015). The report led to the formation of the Thompson Housing Agency (THA) and brought together key stakeholders including the municipality, the Thompson Neighborhood Renewal Corporation, and several Indigenous and community service organizations to steer the organization. The mission of the THA was "...to promote a healthy housing environment in the City of Thompson through research, advocacy, capacity building, coordination of services, housing policy development and property development initiatives" (TEDWG, 2012). THA, along with Manitoba Housing and Keewatin Housing Authority, was also given a mandate for developing and managing modest market rental units. The organization was meant to have one full-time staff to coordinate the work, which was a big task for one person, as it included acting as not only as an information centre where a housing profile/baseline for the region was to be developed and maintained, but also a hub for information about grants and financing programs aimed at landlords and owners in the city (TEDWG, 2012). There were several critical oversights in the TEDWG process including lack of consultation with those accessing Thompson from outlying communities, consideration for the structural barriers created by discrimination and the service needs of those transitioning to live in the community (Schulz & FemNorthNet Thompson Community Group, 2015).

The TEDWG action plan process included an online survey where residents were asked their views on Thompson's regional identity. Key findings were validated in focus groups with some participants noticing that Thompson is fragmented economically and racially — "...with little interaction between white, non-white immigrant groups, and Aboriginal and Métis peoples (Schulz & FemNorthNet Thompson Community Group, 2015). The report showed clear divisions on how

to approach visible homelessness in Thompson's downtown where non-Indigenous participants prioritized crime prevention to manage "negative stereotypes" and Indigenous participants rated housing as the number one weakest characteristic in Thompson (Schulz & FemNorthNet Thompson Community Group, 2015).

According to the 2016 census, the current population in Thompson is 12,878 and about 43% of the population is Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2017). People from the outlying communities utilize financial services and do most of their shopping in Thompson. Although there are not enough services, there are several Indigenous organizations and programs in Thompson, including the MaMowWeTak Friendship Centre, MKO, Keewatin Tribal Council and the Manitoba Metis Federation (MMF). People also come to Thompson to meet health needs in services there that are not available in the outlying communities.

In recent years, Thompson has been willing to work across jurisdictions in building relations with Indigenous peoples in the development of the TEDWG report, and has been a willing participant in Indigenous policy affairs evidenced in the development of the Aboriginal Accord and urban reserve (M. M. Bonnycastle, Simkins, & Siddle, 2016; Walker, Moore, & Linklater, 2012). The City has also shown generosity through providing an in-kind transfer of land to Keewatin Housing Authority for the development of housing projects in the city (Government of Manitoba, 2017; Thompson, 2010). That said, efforts to oppose such housing projects seem to suggest strong disapproval from some sectors in Thompson, for example, in a 2013 letter to the City of Thompson the then president of Thompson Unlimited called for removal of the visibly homeless from the downtown of Thompson (Thompson Citizen, 2010, Barker, 2013). Chartrand and Bignell (2017) contend examples like these, along with the prior exclusion of Indigenous people, opposition to culturally appropriate housing development

and persistent visible disparities experienced by Indigenous people, suggest the community has developed “...in a way that would sustain generational poverty for Indigenous residents of the region to today” (p. 4).

As with almost all urban communities in Canada, people who have been displaced from housing are highly visible in the City of Thompson (Kading & Walmsley, 2018). Small cities like Thompson, due largely to having “limited capacities and resources” for social planning and engaging in health policy, find it extremely difficult to execute effective responses to housing and homelessness issues in their communities necessitating dependence on the provincial and federal governments for setting policy and providing homelessness assistance (Kading & Walmsley, 2018, p. 25).

The Thompson Urban Aboriginal Strategy (TUAS) group has been a key influencer through their collaborative work in the City. It has been critical to the development of housing policy in Thompson (Walker et al., 2012). The TUAS hosted a multi-sectoral consultation in 2014, bringing twenty-four organizations together to support a plan for homelessness. The TUAS consultation formed the basis for setting priorities for the municipality’s 2014–2019 Thompson Community Advisory Board community plan. The completion of the plan helped the City of Thompson to achieve designated community status under the Homeless Partnering Strategy (HPS). Receiving HPS community designation was an important step to increase capacity to develop a local system to serve the homeless.

The HPS was focused on two priority populations, the chronically homeless and episodically homeless. A center-piece of this plan was maintaining the homeless shelter, the development of a Cold Weather Policy, and giving priority to Housing First (TEDWG, 2013). An emergency shelter (24 beds) and transitional housing complex had already been established in the community and the HPS funding helped to maintain these programs. A recent community consultation on needs for addressing homelessness in the community was also funded by the Homeless Partnering Strategy (MNP, 2018). In addition, several recent research projects have focused on housing and homelessness in the city (C. Bonnycastle, Hughes, Bonnycastle, Nixon, & Groening, 2019; M. M. Bonnycastle & Simpkins, 2020). It is also notable that the development strategy group Look North (2017) plans to create a Housing Network of community based housing stakeholders in the region (Canadian Housing Renewal Association, 2018; Look North, 2017).

In recent years the City, with funding from the HPS, has produced three homeless counts. Consistently, the three Point in Time (PiT) Counts (2015, 2016 & 2018) have recognized Indigenous adults as the highest number of people living without home (C. Bonnycastle & Deegan, 2018; M. M. Bonnycastle, Simpkins, & Bonnycastle, 2016; M. M. Bonnycastle, Simpkins, Bonnycastle, & Matiasek, 2015). The most recent count in 2018 showed that 94.5% of adults experiencing homelessness were Indigenous (C. Bonnycastle & Deegan, 2018).

## Literature Review

It is broadly understood that government funding changes since the 1980s have coincided with increasing visibility of homelessness in northern and rural urban settings (M. M. Bonnycastle, Simpkins, & Siddle, 2016; Kading & Walmsley, 2018; Piat et al., 2014). Indigenous people are consistently overrepresented in documented homeless populations in Canada (Bingham et al., 2019; Durbin, 2009; Kauppi, O'Grady, Schiff, Martin, & Ontario Municipal Social, 2017; Leach, 2010). Homelessness among Indigenous people has been linked to crisis levels of poverty, inadequate housing and economic disadvantage connected to broader deficiencies in government policies (Christensen, 2017; Leach, 2010; Thistle, 2017).

According to Thistle (2017), Indigenous homelessness is distinct from other commonly held definitions because it is fundamentally connected with Indigenous worldviews and conditions that have been and continue to be shaped by colonial processes. While Indigenous people's experiences are linked to developments that have been used to inform general definitions of homelessness, Indigenous experiences cannot simply be defined as the absence of having a structure to live in (Thistle, 2017). Rather, it 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" (Thistle, 2017, p. 6). (See also Appendix B)

A significant cause of the rates of Indigenous homelessness has been linked to housing exclusion resulting from federal housing policies. Federal policies for housing affecting Indigenous people have mainly been poorly planned and executed, inadequately resourced, and advanced with little consultation or understanding of the cultural needs of Indigenous people (Belanger, 2016; Senate Canada, 2017). According to a recent Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA) survey, 20% of Indigenous people outside reserves experience housing need versus 12.4% of non-Indigenous people; in urban centers, 1 in 15 Indigenous people will experience homelessness (8 times more likely than non-Indigenous) compared to 1 in 128 for the general population (2017). The scarcity of good quality housing has created a crisis in many Indigenous communities resulting in excessively high rates of overcrowding. This has provoked homelessness and forced migration to urban centers (Belanger,

2016; M. M. Bonnycastle, Simpkins, et al., 2016). In the 2016 First Nations Health Survey, housing was listed in the top five reasons for people to move away from community (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2018). Gray, Chau, Huerta, and Frankish (2011) also found housing in the top five reasons for Indigenous people's movement to cities. According to Statistics Canada, based on information from the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS) and the 2012 Aboriginal Peoples survey (APS), over 40% of First Nations living on reserve in Manitoba were living in overcrowded housing and over 50% were living in homes that need major repairs (Chernikova, 2016).

Housing policy and response to the housing crisis for First Nations households, whether on or off reserve, have been inadequate (Belanger, 2016). Researchers have found current funding for housing on reserve will not meet the demand in Indigenous communities (Deane & Szabo, 2020). Research has shown housing scarcity and displacement from housing increases risk of becoming homeless for those who are already facing inequalities and discrimination. Inadequate and poor housing conditions have serious impacts on social and health outcomes creating social and economic exclusion (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), 2017; Loppie Reading & Wien, 2009). Poor housing conditions also place households at higher risk of experiencing house fires, "It has been well-documented that current conditions in many First Nation communities have led to unsafe living conditions where housing is prone to fire, disproportionate to non-Indigenous communities" (House of Commons Canada, 2018, p. 1).

Having a house is not necessarily the same as having a home. For Indigenous people, it is beyond a physical structure and income security (Thistle, 2017), it is about having control over one's envi-

ronment, having access to rights, freedoms and resources and being able to develop and connect with all beings (INAC, 2017; Hulchanski, Campsie, Chau, Hwang, & Paradis, 2009). Being homeless further disrupts these connections, and it is also a full-time occupation — seeking out and obtaining food, self-care needs, shelter and servicing addictions (Klop, Evenblij, Gootjes, de Veer & Onwuteaka-Philipsen, 2018). People who live in shelters and/or are unstably housed are subjected to systems that have not been designed to respond to their particular needs. For example, such systems often have complex requirements for access, are scattered and have limited hours of operation (Klop et al., 2018).

Accessing and keeping good housing is difficult for Indigenous people in urban settings. The availability of culturally appropriate housing is extremely limited in Canada, as well as home ownership rates are lower for Indigenous people (Canadian Housing Renewal Association, 2017). In addition, Indigenous people are more likely to be subjected to housing discrimination. For example, being denied or offered substandard options (M. M. Bonnycastle, Simpkins, et al., 2016; Corrado & Evaluation Associates, 2003). In research on housing discrimination in Winnipeg and Thompson, over 40% of participants in Thompson reported they had been directed to rent in a specific neighborhood/area (41.4%) in the city and given a restricted list of poorer quality units when they went to view rentals (Corrado & Evaluation Associates, 2003). Discrimination cited by participants in Thompson included being denied housing because they had a lower income (20%) and their housing options being restricted due to their skin color (43%). Nearly half believed discrimination resulted in experiencing lower quality assistance in housing matters generally; and over a third thought they were forced to pay higher rent.

# Methodology

We use community-based participatory research (CBPR) to include the voices of people with lived experience to identify the causes of, and to explore possibilities to prevent and reduce, homelessness in northern Manitoba communities (M. M. Bonnycastle, Simpkins, et al., 2016). The research also involved key informants in Indigenous organizations and groups in Thompson and in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation. CBPR has been used frequently in social work and other health disciplines when researchers are seeking collaborative methods to work with community (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). CBPR researchers work collaboratively, become well-acquainted with the everyday concerns of people and work toward producing practical knowledge that will improve conditions for individuals and communities (Reason, 2008).

## Participants

This project included 22 participants whose age ranged between 24 to 62 years with an average age of 41 years. Nine participants self-identified

as female, one as two-spirited and 12 as male. Twenty-one two of the participants had lived experience of homelessness and/or overcrowded housing at some point in their lives. All but one participant self-identified as Indigenous, and this participant was a service provider and had never directly experienced homelessness. Indigenous participants were Cree, Métis and Sayisi Dene. All the participants spoke English fluently and a few participants were bilingual and understood or were fluent in Cree. This research took place in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and Thompson and most of the participants from Thompson were from many of the outlying<sup>2</sup> communities in the Northern region of Manitoba. Participants identified 12 different communities as their place of origin: Cross Lake) (2) , God's Lake Narrows (1), Lac Brochet (2), Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (Nelson House (7), Bunibonibee Cree Nation (Oxford House) (1) , Pukatawagan (1) Thompson (2), Shamattawa First Nation (1), South Indian Lake First Nation (2) , Tataskweyak Cree Nation (Split Lake) (1), Sayisi Dene First Nation (Tadouli) (1), and Winnipeg (1).

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<sup>2</sup> Outlying communities refers in this report to towns, reserves surrounding or remote to Thompson that access services in the City.

Two participants were living on the street when they were interviewed. Five participants were living at the shelter. Seven were experiencing hidden homelessness meaning they were living in overcrowded housing, inadequate housing, or couch surfing. The remainder were transitional housing (YWCA, CMHA and 95 Cree Rd) and two had their own housing at the time of the interview.

### Elders and Indigenous Protocols

We got approval from the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation Chief and Council to develop the research (see appendix A). The researchers are non-Indigenous and sought the collaborative involvement of community members and participants in the research process in order to respect traditional protocols, which is consistent with Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2009). This was approached in several ways. For example, we hired and worked with several community members in NCN and students from the northern social work program and community members in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation. Research participants were involved in several activities including training, interviews, data collection, transcriptions, translations and design of the aspects of the research. All student and community research assistants involved directly with the participants were Indigenous. Preference was given to students who had some understanding of the local language and culture. Several research assistants understood and/or spoke Cree.

In addition, at the onset of the project, the researchers met with two Elders, one from NCN and the other from Thompson, to discuss the project and their level of involvement. Each elder was offered tobacco at the first meeting and received \$100 honorarium. Throughout the project, the researchers continued to meet with the Elders in person and via telephone to consult, share information and update on the progress of

the project. The Elders were involved in all the focus groups and community cafés.

### Food

We shared food with participants of each focus group and community cafés. It is an important ingredient in participatory action research, as it contributes to strengthening relationship building. It is also consistent with traditions and the culture of northern communities, particularly with Indigenous peoples.

### Ethics

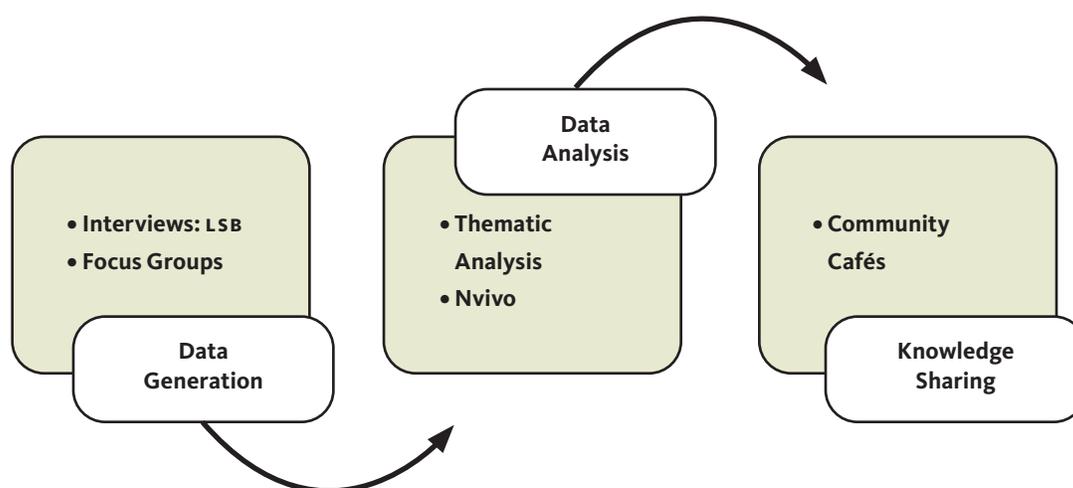
Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Manitoba and UCN Research Ethics Boards. Participants for interviews and focus groups were recruited through posters and local services and agencies. To be eligible for inclusion participants needed to have lived experience of homelessness, or be a family member or be a key informant who worked with people who are homeless. Participants' consent was obtained, and this included consent to audio record interviews and focus groups and to share data. Following the First Nations principles of OCAP (FNIGC), we submitted a copy of the proposal and got the approval from the Chief of Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation. We followed the OCAP processes established by NCN leadership, including seeking consent from the Chief and council, engaging with key advisors in the community and collaborating with several leaders and an elder in the community.

### Research Process

#### **Data Generation and Analysis**

The process (see Figure 1) and write up of the research required us to be active in building relationships and trust with participants and community members in order to increase our understanding of the community by the researchers to ensure a better-quality understanding of

FIGURE 1 Research Process



the answers to our questions. Throughout this project there were several meetings with service providers and key stakeholders in both communities, NCN and Thompson, in order to contribute to the development of relationships and trust and to recruit participants. Multiple forms of data collection were sought, including individual interviews and focus groups. Participants in interviews and focus groups received \$25. Lived experience participants in cafés received \$10 in appreciation of their participation.

### *Interviews*

The data collection occurred in phases starting with the interviews, which averaged 50 minutes. In depth semi-structured interviews were held using visual methods. We developed an interview approach using different symbols for participants mapping their stories and experiences. Visual methods have been used in different ways, for example, the Vidaview Life Story Board (Chongo, Chase, Lavoie, Harder, & Mignone, 2018; Mignone, Chase, & Roger, 2019). The use of multiple methods when seeking participant's stories about their life experiences allows for more creativity and for more perspectives to materialize

in the interviews (Berends, 2011; Bagnoli, 2009; Keats, 2009). The use of both narrative and visual methods in the interviews was also chosen because this has been shown to be a good method for building rapport and collecting difficult life experiences in interviews (Bradbury, 2017). This approach aids participants to externalize their experience, thus promoting cognitive distance (Chongo et al., 2018). Bradbury (2017) asserts, "Visual data collection methods involve participants in documenting and reflecting on their worlds, enabling them to narrate lives that may be difficult to both tell and hear" (p. 33). A visual method creates a focal point where interviewer and participant are engaged in collaboration and exploration. There is flexibility in how the visual method is utilized and how much control is given to the researcher and/or the participant. This creates more potential for the development of shared understanding versus a face to face interview (Mignone et al., 2019).

Symbols (figure 2) were developed for use with a Bristol boards to generate a dialogue between the participant and the interviewer. At the start of each interview participants received a brief orientation to the use of the Bristol board, types

**FIGURE 2 Visual Symbols used for Interviews**

	Clouds are representative of participants future dreams for themselves, community, family.
	These explosion-like symbols represent troubles, hurts, and/or difficult transitions for the person/family or community.
	These dialogue symbols represent client's ideas about what we can do to help/prevent homelessness.
	Hearts generally denote caring relationships — such as with children.
	Bodies small and large denote people, either the participant or their loved ones. Markings on the bodies indicate injuries/illness/trauma
	Stars represent achievements/skills/abilities.
	Some boards have the river symbol which represents periods of transition/homelessness (this later became the backpack)
	Backpacks represent periods of transitions and/or homelessness when the client did not have a house to live in.
	Houses are literally housing they lived in — markings indicate how many people lived there and when they occupied this house.
<b>Other Markings</b>	Drawings are related to parts of the interview. Say a person is talking about when they were a guide or had access to the land, they may draw a moose/deer etc...

of symbols and their meaning. We also showed examples of symbols that could be applied to the Bristol board to represent their experiences. The instructions for the interview and symbols were intentionally broad to encourage participants to take control of their story. Participants were not restricted in their use of the symbols and were encouraged to use pens and materials freely to depict aspects of their experience. Most participants used the top of the Bristol board to depict a timeline of experiences of housing and homelessness (early life). The middle of the board was often used to depict community and family aspects of their experience, along with their ideas and dreams. Lengthways along the bottom

third of the board the participants often placed information about themselves (demographics, education, children and achievements).

After an orientation to the board, participants were asked basic demographic questions about their age, gender and community. Prompts were given to choose from the selection of symbols and to make notations on symbols and/or on the board itself. The interviews did not follow a sequential pattern; many participants moved back and forth between different aspects of their lives/experiences and this sometimes resulted in changes to the placement of symbols/notations. The configuration of the story boards and placement of the symbols took similar shape across the

Bristol boards. There were very few story boards where participants drew free hand, most chose from the symbols to represent their experiences.

### Focus Groups

We facilitated three focus groups. The first focus group was held in NCN with 11 participants including homeless life experience participants and service providers. Subsequent focus groups were held in Thompson, one with homeless lived experience people with 7 participants and the second one with service providers and other community members with 10 participants.

### Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into a qualitative computer analysis program (NVivo 12) by a research assistant. The interviews were then examined using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Padgett, 2017). The interview questions guided the initial coding of the interview content. Additional preliminary codes and categories were identified by reading each of the transcriptions (i.e., first level of coding). Data placed into each of these broad codes were then reviewed to identify themes within the large coding categories.

The codes and categories were constantly compared and developed through a fluid and circular process whereby incidents were compared to each category and previous incidents (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), thus further developing relationships and themes in the data. Finally, the researchers reviewed the coding to identify additional important codes, themes, and relationships, and this analysis is presented here according to the six themes: housing, impact of colonialism, racism, domestic violence and sexual abuse, issues about services, programs and supports, and relationships. To ensure participant anonymity, participants' names are replaced with a number.

As a part of the data analysis, stories were summarized into short vignettes and tables. As discussed above, preliminary data/themes were explored in focus groups and cafés. The initial conceptual categories that developed included: causes of homelessness, housing conditions, homeless conditions, services and supports, health concerns, services and supports and connections to people, community and the land/culture. For homeless conditions the initial categories were early life (childhood homelessness) experiences; skills of helpers; access-

FIGURE 3 Categories and Themes

Conceptual Categories	Themes
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The housing situation</li> <li>• We have too many people living under one roof</li> <li>• I was never really in one place — housing instability</li> <li>• The house burned down</li> </ul>
Impact of Colonialism & Racism at Different Levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't know if you heard anything about the sixties scoop?</li> <li>• A lot of racism is still alive</li> </ul>
Domestic Violence and Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I... I was stuck with him, like I wasn't able to leave.</li> </ul>
Lack of Services, Programs and Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I wasn't okay</li> <li>• I've been asking for help for so many years</li> <li>• You can't get no rest</li> <li>• I don't like alcohol</li> </ul>
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We help each other out</li> <li>• A good life</li> <li>• People are happiest on the land</li> <li>• We need to educate community</li> </ul>

ing housing; transitions from institutions (child welfare, mental health); domestic violence; and, criminal justice involvement. The final layer of coding occurred after the conclusion of two cafés held in NCN and Thompson.

Subsequent conceptual categories, in the final layer of coding, that emerged were: housing, impact of colonialism, racism at different levels, domestic violence and abuse, lack of services, programs and supports, and relationships. Within each category themes were identified from within interview and focus group transcripts and chosen based on their relevance for grouping experiences of multiple participants (Figure 3).

### Knowledge Sharing

#### *Community Cafés*

Credibility of the findings and the interpretation were assured through prolonged engagement with the data, the occurrence of the essential structure in all narratives, use of participants' own words to name and illustrate themes and the development of community cafés to validate the findings, interpretation of data and deepened the themes. Two community cafes were

facilitated, one in NCN with 10 participants including service providers and those with lived experience. The second one was in Thompson, with 15 service providers.

### Limitations

The main limitation was the scope of the research, which didn't allow for broader representation of communities in the region. This research only represents the experiences of interview participants in Thompson and some surrounding communities. Therefore, the findings embody the experiences of a limited number of participants (1 or 2 adults) from each of the eleven communities, except Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (Nelson House) that included 7 participants.

Additionally, the project was small-scale and had limited resources to engage with community advisors (housing, health and substance use treatment) in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation. With additional funding we would have been able to bring advisors together in the region for co-learning and capacity building.

Some interview participants were experiencing chronic mental health and substance use problems which may have impaired their recollection of events and experiences. The storyboard interviews with participants could have benefited from breaking the interview up into smaller parts over two or three meetings. Having separate meetings would have allowed time for further reflection and explanation of the individual's experiences.

Because in the first focus group there was a mix of participants with different levels of power, service providers and lived experience, we identified different levels of participation. As a consequence, we remediated these issues by creating two focus groups, one for primarily participants with lived experience and one for service providers.

FIGURE 4 Community Café



# Findings

The overall purpose of this project was to identify people's experiences navigating housing, homelessness, and services. The participants in this research project were people with lived experience of housing instability and homelessness and service providers. Importantly, service providers may also have had lived experience. When we use the term 'lived experience' and/or lived experience of homelessness we are not just referring to people who are currently visibly homeless; we are describing those who have experienced one or more of the 12 dimensions identified in *Thistle's Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada* (2017). Thistle's consultations with First Nations, Métis and Inuit were extensive including over 50 participants from across Canada finding "...each person and community had experienced degrees of homelessness, and that each had endured them in different ways". The following data includes the thematic organization of the findings from the audio transcriptions of the interview with the visual stories and audio transcriptions and notes from focus groups, and finally notes from community cafés.

## Homeless Lived Experience

Even people in my community are not homeless, I don't consider them because they have family members or friends, or family from, generations before, they've known each other, you know they lived each other, right? But what I consider homelessness is, like say people in Thompson or in the cities, but I'll say Thompson cause I know Thompson, and I know people that live in garbage cans or... They just go to the bush and sleep in the bush... Well, not only NCN members, but even oh, people that, ah..., from other communities... (interview 18).

As it is represented in the diagram below (figure 5), housing is the prominent theme that emerged from the interviews with homeless lived experience participants. Housing is interconnected with other five themes. Though housing need is the most important theme that came out of the interviews — we begin with the strengths in the culture and in the people, as is plainly shown in the narratives about relationships between people, community, land and culture.

FIGURE 5 Findings



### **Relationships**

#### ***Good Life***

The sense of community and connection with the land had profound meaning in participants' stories. Being in housing in a community meant there was a place to connect with traditional ways and the land. Participants talked reflectively about times before housing was constructed for them by the federal government, when they contended people were able to respond quickly to housing needs with the resources they had on hand. For one participant "...it was a good life", (Interview 17) when people worked together and homes were constructed from the resources at hand on the land. If the floor got dirty or the housing deteriorated it was burned, and a new floor was laid down or a new home was constructed. If a young couple wanted to start a family, a house was built for them,

Because in my day when I was growing up there was only me and my grandpa. Somebody gets to the age, even 14, or 15, as soon as they can take care of themselves. They build them a new house. Like a cabin, like a log cabin where... It was home, their own space to get help, get started, you know. As soon as families got married ... they build them a house, the whole community would build them a house... Ok, that's what I mean about government policy. You can't just live in a log cabin, you have to have electricity, the floor, cause I know when I was growing up, I saw some houses that didn't have a floor, they were just bare, but... But like, without a floor, just moss, or... Just tree branches... For the floor, and when you need to clean up you just... Take everything out, burn it, and put it here, use... It's not like we don't have

all these trees, we could build houses for people (Interview 17).

### **People are Happiest on the Land**

Participants in interviews talked of the importance of connection to culture and the land. Several men who were chronically homeless at the time of their interview had been hunters, trappers, fishermen and guides. They spoke about their skills in building houses and surviving on the land. Some had chronic alcohol problems and had experienced injuries that got in the way of using those skills. Several interview participants, spoke about the disconnection from the land and culture since leaving the community to come to Thompson. A participant in mental health transitional housing spoke about missing community land-based activities, “*Yeah, like, uh, like in Tadoule, they do a community hunt every fall, in Tadoule. You go up North and get caribou, bring back for the people.*” (Interview 9). When asked if he had been able to participate since moving to Thompson, “*Aw, not since I got here [Thompson], yeah. Aw, well... like hunting... I like going out and... camping, fishing... and... Yeah. Going for wood.*” (Interview 9).

For another participant, who was waiting in the crisis centre for housing in her community, housing was a foundation to connect her children to the land and traditions,

Yeah. Oh, and I get, uh, I wanna be... connected to, uh, my traditional — our traditional ways... My dreams is to get a campsite for me and my family. Uh, ‘cause I want them, I want to teach them about the, uh, about the outdoors, and... about our tradition (Interview 10).

Some participants shared positive memories of living in close quarters with family, particularly when it involved living with grandparents. For these participants this was a time when they connected with the culture and land while learning important skills, “*Yeah, like it was a big cabin, there was a bed there, bed there, and a bed there*

*and a stove and a table.*” (Interview 17); “*They lived off the land, they lived the traditional way.*” (Interview 22); “*Yeah, ‘cause I was taught by — from my grandparents.*” (Interview 20).

For another participant who had been chronically homeless since his adolescence his dream was to have a place in his community to “fish” and “carve”. “*Yeah, I’m an artist*” (Interview 13).

Though housing was foremost in the discussion of ideas and dreams shared by participants most involved connection to their family and other loved ones. People’s dreams and ideas about housing were often interwoven with hopes of connecting/reconnecting with relationships, community, the land and culture. For this participant his loss of connection to his people has also meant he is disconnected from the land and community.

There used to be people — my uncle, like, my cousins, all those, they used to take me fishing, hunting, and... visit... or... help me get wood... tt, dad used to help me that time. Used to... he used to talk to me about the way I was, my schizophrenia. ‘Cause I, I used to say a lot of crazy things back then. I, I can’t remember most of it but, uh... they would talk to me, like...they were trying to help me, yeah (interview 9)?

One participant’s involvement with child welfare and criminal justice displaced her from housing for thirty years. She lost her son at the time of becoming homeless. Her number one dream was to reconnect with her son who was now living in another province. She had found him on social media and was going “[t]hrough Facebook once in a while.” “*To ...see what he’s up to*” (Interview 11).

### **We Help Each Other Out**

Many participants stated they were not homeless or their people were not homeless because they could always go home to family. As shown in the quote at the start of this section, one participant asserted there was no homelessness in

community, because people help each other out. Housing was also connected to helping others and this included leaving housing to make room for family, being in housing was also a foundation to give back to community.

A male participant thought being in permanent housing would permit him to “[c]ontribute more to the community... Uh... I like to help people; I like to help people. Homeless people and... People with families always need help. Uh, especially single parents. I also like helping my Elders” (Interview 18).

A participant in transitional housing in Thompson stated that if they had the resources, they would not only house themselves, but they would help the homeless, “Well, If I became rich, I would help the homeless people. Like what they need to go in the shower with. Something to read. Articles. Newspaper. Articles. I wish we had the internet (Interview 5). This same participant spoke of grief about friends, who had died while on the street in Thompson,

I have lost some friends who stayed at the homeless shelter...One of them had a double heart attack. One froze to death, one died from liver failure. They were homeless. They used to offer me a drink, they used to feed me. Offer me cigarettes (Interview 5).

Participants also spoke to feeling accepted and safe within the homeless community in Thompson, “They help each other out, they tell you “okay, you don’t have a place, check this place out, this part of town”. Yes, it’s, um, they’re very caring.” (Interview 12). “It’s about trust, and family and closure (Yah, the community) Yah. Cause we’re all on the same boat, hey” (Interview 22).

A participant who appeared strongly connected with the homeless community in Thompson stated,

I help the homeless out there. I give them food, change and that. Or a drink for a hangover fix or whatever. I just give it to them a bottle for the fix,

and then they pay me back. And that’s how we look after each other on the streets (Interview 5).

## Housing

### *The Housing Situation*

The main reasons most participants gave for their move out of their community, or for not to being able to move back, were dissatisfaction with housing and lack of housing or shelter in their community,

The only reason — yeah, the only reason we moved to Thompson, cause that’s where we could find a place, ‘cause in Cross(we), pretty much just couldn’t get a house — well, you’re living with your parents. (Interview 12)

Participants painted a picture of housing where there is no range of choices for people with differing needs and/or at different stages in their lives,

Yeah, like we need more, we need more homes for our community. Like, even if it, uh, was a combined home, like, like, those six-plex — Or a townhouse, like a teacherage — we would need more of those for our single parents (Interview 20).

### *We Have Too Many People Living Under One Roof*

Nearly 50% of interview participants had experienced living in overcrowded housing at some point in their lives. Several participants recalled overcrowded living conditions when they were children. Three participants were currently living in overcrowded conditions. Several stated they had moved from their community as a result of these conditions,

— (In) our community we have too many people living under one roof (Interview 20).

there’s what 12, 15, 18 people staying in a house, that’s why I moved (Interview 21).

The challenges described for living in these conditions included experiencing ‘feeling homeless’, limited or no privacy, interrupted routines (sleep, hygiene, nutrition), having no place to secure

their belongings, supporting others financially, and struggling to go to work/school,

I felt like I was homeless., And even if I did stay with relatives and stuff, it wasn't your own space...And your own privacy. And that takes a lot out of you. Especially if you're working, and you get discouraged a lot (Interview 15).

A participant, who had been living in overcrowded conditions for several years, wished for housing for elders who weren't ready for the senior's facility in the community, "*tiny houses, I'm tempted to make my husband build me just a one room house, where we could live in peace*" (Interview 17).

Two participants were commuting between NCN and Thompson due to the lack of housing in the community. Participants stated they had lost their housing when they left the community to seek opportunities and education. One of these participants thought people might be choosing not to pursue opportunities outside of the community for fear of losing their housing. He had lost his housing after it burned down when he was away from the community working. The house wasn't replaced because he was deemed to have abandoned it. He had been couch-surfing for nine years at the time of the interview.

And, uh, they said I abandoned the house too..., which I didn't. I was out of the — reserve working. Uh, my brother-in-law was staying in that house (Interview 19).

Several interview participants expressed willingness to occupy rundown homes, garages or to build log homes in the bush in order to be able to live in community,

If I had a — my own home, even if it was rundown, oh my gosh, I would work so hard to make it my own and make it nice (Interview 14).

Uh... recommend the guys to get together and help one another, maybe cut logs around the bush, make their own log homes (Interview 5).

Several participants in interviews described poor living conditions in their experiences of housing on reserves including mold, lack of insulation, and improper venting. Some participants talked about living in housing without plumbing. Participants also identified lack of maintenance of houses and the fact these houses were not built properly for the conditions in the north, "*I have seen these houses we have now are not up to code for... for the winter here, North... There's a lot of boarded up houses, lots of vacant houses here.*" (Interview 18).

### ***I was Never Really in One Place (Housing Instability)***

Fifteen participants had experienced housing instability and homelessness in their early lives (before age twenty). Seven participants (nearly 30%) first experienced homelessness in their early childhood (0–9 years). Homelessness during youth was also discussed in several interviews. In one example an interview participant, who had been moving between her grandfather and mother from her earliest years, became homeless after her grandfather passed. After his death, she moved back and forth between Winnipeg and Thompson and wanted her own housing, but it didn't happen,

Yeah, as the years went by from 2011, I was back and forth to my mom's place and Winnipeg. Things never worked out. I tried to find a place to stay. I had workers try to help me out to help find a place, but nothing ever worked out (Interview 5).

One participant stated, "*I never really was in one place...*" (Interview 1) speaking to the fact that he had been removed into foster care from his family/community at three years of age. He never saw his parents again and was not reunited with family until he was fourteen when he was discharged from CFS care.

Another participant worried about her granddaughter who lived with her and several other

family members in NCN and in Thompson during her childhood and adolescence. “...I think that’s why she’s so transient, like she can’t really hold a job”. She also acknowledged, though, that her daughter is very adaptable and resilient wherever she goes. “I mean..., she’d be at my house, she’d fit right there. She readapts... like over here, be here for a few days”. She noted, however, that the granddaughter hasn’t been able to finish high school. “So, she doesn’t have an education” (Interview 17).

A participant in NCN, who had been couch surfing since their late adolescence, was moving between six different households at the time he was interviewed. He described longing for his own place. “Yeah, ‘cause I want my own space. I want to be able to do my own laundry and ... take a shower any time I want” and “cook for myself...instead of the whole tribe” (Interview 18). This participant discussed catching sleep where they could and coming in late for work because they hadn’t been able to sleep the night before due to their unstable circumstances. “...I don’t like, uh, people coming in and out, knocking all night” (interview 18).

A participant in Thompson described the challenges and managing displacement from housing in Thompson while they worked for Manitoba Hydro,

Uh, I was living with my buddy, oh, we used to work for Hydro, we got — coming from Gillam, used to stay with him, I think two weeks or three weeks, I moved around and left. Stayed with a friend in McCreedy, in the camp. Still went to work, and stayed with my buddy in that hotel room for a while. And weekends he went back, so I’d just find a new place to stay. Anywhere I could find. I sometimes slept in the bush. (Interview 12).

For another participant couch surfing between family members was a prolonged ordeal culminating in living at the shelter before moving to 95 Cree Rd (a housing first program),

And there was no room at my grandmother’s place or anybody else’s place. And my ex-partner didn’t want me to live with him. I started packing up and I came here to Thompson. I went to my auntie’s place at her apartment, but she kicked me out. And after that she dropped me off at the homeless shelter. And I started staying there and yeah it was hard. (Interview 5).

A participant reflected on his experience moving between sets of grandparents and his parents, because his mother didn’t qualify for housing in the community (pre-Bill C -31). When he was in his mid-adolescence, his mother was finally qualified to be a member of the Band and eligible to be housed in the community, but he still didn’t gain a secure place to call home,

Since growing up, (I) never had roots where you know, this is our house, this is our place, sense of ownership for anything until (I was) 15, I never had a room at my mum’s place, cause where I slept all the time when I went was the couch. (Interview 12)

Another participant spoke about the sense of hopelessness that can result when a person does not have their own place to stay, and how this can diminish motivation, “Yeah. And you’re like, oh why should I work? I have nowhere to go; I have no place to stay.” (Interview 15).

#### *The house burned down*

Nearly a third (7) of those interviewed discussed house fires as a cause of homelessness or living in overcrowded housing. Three of these participants experienced this when they were young children (0–9 years). It took four years or more to replace some of these houses, while others didn’t appear to have been rebuilt. For some participants, this was the beginning of prolonged displacement from family and community or the entering into overcrowded living conditions with family. One participant moved in with their grandparents, making it sixteen people in the home. They

shared a room with their parents and siblings for four years, until their home was rebuilt. For another interview participant, a house fire resulted in loss of connection with his entire family for over ten years. For three other participants, a house fire was a direct cause of their current homelessness, either for themselves (2) or for a close relative (1).

### **Impact of Colonialism and Racism at Different Levels**

*I don't know if you heard anything about the sixties scoop?*

Child welfare was implicated as a cause of homelessness by several participants who had been taken into care and later discharged or aged-out. One participant was removed when he was three years of age and was later sent back to his community of origin to overcrowded housing when he was 14 years old, *"I don't know if you know anything about the sixties scoop... the whole family was taken away actually. My whole family."* (Interview 1). Another participant was taken into care at five years of age and after several years of mistreatment ran away. She was placed in group homes and then let go to move between family members,

And then the reason why I left was because I wasn't being treated properly and I could tell the difference between how my foster mum would treat her kids, like her biological children... (Interview 14).

One participant spoke to the intergenerational effects of residential schools,

There's no family structure, the people that went to residential school, they don't know how to take care of themselves and their children (Interview 17).

*A lot of racism is still alive*

Some participants shared their experiences with discrimination. Several of their experiences were

directly related to housing (availability and access) and two were related to accessing services and supports in Thompson,

Like, say if we were to go out of the community — A lot of racism is still alive... It means... I feel like, we're all judged in one, like, we're all judged in the same bunch (Interview 14).

Uh... well, I tried to get housing, but it was hard. I still have a hard time getting housing. I don't know ... they used to say it was not available. (sighs), yeah, it's, uh, there's none available, like you know, they're all rented out (Interview 9).

Two interview participants discussed experiences accessing services in Thompson where they and others were confronted with racism,

...walked in, "no, you can't shop here, you gotta go." Like holy smokes! (Interview 7).

Like people would automatically stigmatize her as a drunk, you can't even go to a washroom in Thompson (Interview 17).

Another participant discussed the impact of his father's internalized racism,

My dad was very demeaning towards our Indian culture...He felt very ashamed of it... the colonization through the residential school and everything, it's just the way they were looked at, as dirty....But they were Métis my great grandfather was from Scotland (Interview 12).

### **We Need to Educate Community**

Participants in interviews saw the need for a wider conversation and education about the history of colonization and its' consequences on Indigenous population and therefore a critical cause of homelessness.

I think we should educate them and the public, in general....Well they need to educate the community. Cause there's no money, like I'm saying back in uh before the colonization there's no record of abuse, no records of runaways, no

records of suicide, and the Indian culture. So, everything was brought in with colonization. So, and there's the uh, there was somebody out there that could explain and actually take apart colonization bit by bit, this is the reason why you are this way. Because all this happened, so this is not all you, don't...think of yourself as just bad. (Interview 12)

### **Domestic Violence and Abuse**

*I... I was stuck with him, like I wasn't able to leave.*

Though many participants experienced violence in their early life and in their adult relationships, this was principally common amongst women. One participant had early experiences with abuse in her relationship with her boyfriend. They had lived for many years in overcrowded living conditions and the violence intensified when they moved into their own house. She had to leave the community to enter the shelter in Thompson. She gave some of her children to child welfare through a voluntary placement agreement, *"abusive boyfriend. emotional, psychological. At first, it was like, physical but he stopped. I was 16 — no.. Fifteen... and he was... 18."* (Interview 10).

*I wasn't okay*

Histories of sexual abuse and trauma in their families were frequent among the women who were interviewed, *"When I was 13 or 14 years old, I got raped. I don't want my girls to go through what I went through."* (Interview 6). For one participant sexual abuse in her home forced her to move out of the community and into a crisis shelter, *"...Yeah. So, I just... thought 'okay, I'm with family, I'm gonna be okay.'...But I wasn't okay... 'Cause I was sexually molested by a relative... So, that's why I had to move to the crisis centre"* (Interview 20). One female participant, housed in transitional housing at the time of interview, had been homeless and unstably housed for... *"[t]hirty years now. Just living, renting rooms. Not houses — sometimes apartments but — yeah.*

*I'd sleep on my friend's floor sometimes..... On the living room floor"* (Interview 11). This participant discussed experiencing sexual assault and always feeling at risk *"...lots of times, yeah. When I was homeless"*

Two interview participants shared the anguish about being rejected by family. One discussed he was *"always the black sheep in the family"* (Interview 1). Another participant shared,

*Like I am the mistake in the family..... and I don't give a shit what I am doing right now. Every time I am away from them, I think they banished me, cause every time I try to communicate with my family, phone calls, in person when they see me on the streets, they might give me money or something to wear or something to eat. But they don't really, don't really, ....* (Interview 5).

One participant who had been chronically homeless for many years in Thompson described being bullied and physically assaulted as a result of his appearance. *"They, they just hurt me. They do this,... everybody in town"* (Interview 13).

Many participants shared experiences of emotional and physical abuse in their early life. Several participants (men and women) spoke about harsh parenting experience in childhood and adolescence. Child welfare involvement and removal into CFS care were also common experiences.

An example was shown by a participant who experienced untreated mental illness and violence in her relationship spiraled into prolonged homelessness after she was charged with assault on her spouse and a child. Her involvement with child welfare and criminal justice led to losing her son and not being able to obtain employment or housing. At the time of the interview she was in transitional housing, but had been homeless in shelters and couch surfing in Thompson for over 30 years,

*I got in a fight with my old man, I—I threw something at him, and it hit his son... And then*

I got ... into the... child abuse registry — but it's under... assault with a weapon and... It wasn't even a weapon.. I just threw something, a curling iron at him and it hit him and then it hit his son...And then I got charged, yeah... it was when my son was five years old... I ended up homeless, 'because there's a lot of jobs that require a criminal check and that's why I couldn't get a good, decent job. Uh, I got in trouble with the law. And I, um... it was for theft at Wal-Mart, it was stupid. I was written up in the paper (precipitated 30 years of homelessness) (Interview 11).

As discussed above, many participants witnessed violence in their early life and for some this led into experiencing homelessness in their early years. As one participant described, she and her siblings lived with her mother for about six months in shelters throughout Manitoba when she was five or six years old, *"It felt like we were in and out of those shelters, for at least half a year. I only remember being... in our Brandon home for Christmas... January, February, March, April. For five months, I only remember living in Brandon."* (Interview 14). This participant was taken into CFS care soon after they were housed and remained there until she returned to community (Age 5 to 14).

### **Services, Programs and Supports**

*I've been asking for help for so many years*

Many participants were not able to get their support and housing needs met in the outlying communities or in Thompson. Research participants' transitions to Thompson were often met with structural barriers. These barriers included discrimination, lack of affordable housing options, unclear processes and inadequate responses from services. Several participants reported they didn't know where to go to access the help they needed. Participants spoke about not understanding or getting confused in their efforts to get into housing in communities and in

Thompson. Some participants stated they tried, but gave up after their efforts to connect with housing led to naught. In one interview the participant stated the housing agency in Thompson kept losing their paperwork. This participant described her confusion about the process to buy a house in NCN and her fears that her status as a lone parent would get in the way of being prioritized for housing,

I apply every year for a house, and now they're saying you can put a five thousand dollar down-payment, but first it has to go through the band, and council, and once it goes through there, you can and cannot be approved, I'm a single parent, so they look at me and say, "well, yeah, she does work here, and she commutes, so she's fine, so, nah, she don't need a house". And yet, I can still use a house...Cause I have children (Interview 16).

Many discussed coming to Thompson for mental health, substance use and medical services. Several participants had no choice but to leave their community to seek help for their situations whether it was living with mental health issues, domestic violence or physical disability. One participant (Interview 3) stated there needed to be shelters for women in the outlying community and more education about domestic violence, starting in the schools. Others thought there should be mental health supports in outlying communities so they didn't have to leave community,

I didn't have any support. Yeah, I wouldn't have to leave home, yeah (Interview 11).

Though, as above, many of the participants had experienced trauma and loss, only one participant talked about receiving counselling for these issues, *"I was actually the one who put myself in counselling"* (Interview 14).

One participant described being discharged from inpatient mental health in Winnipeg with a bus ticket. At the time, his only option was to stay in a precarious situation with extended

family. He was fearful of losing his things at this place, so he hid his bus ticket under the mattress, but then forgot it there when he left the next morning to catch the bus. From there, he fell into homelessness in Winnipeg,

(I)?...was at the... Selkirk Health Institution. Yeah, I had to go to my auntie's, all my bags, my clothes, and then, uh... I had a bus ticket to come back to Thompson. And I forgot it underneath the bed I was sleeping on, 'cause I'd hid my bus ticket ... the night before. So, I was at the bus depot.... And then, uh, I wanted to get on the bus and I was looking for my ticket, couldn't find it. It was right downtown, so...I ended up going to... Salvation Army, I think... (Interview 8).

Trauma and loss were experienced by many participants. This was frequently accompanied by housing instability and episodes of homelessness. This participant's (Interview 3) experience during her adolescence was particularly demonstrative. It began when she lost their home after her mother passed away. The only accommodation offered her was to stay with her grandmother in a senior's facility. When her grandmother needed medical support outside of the community, she was housed temporarily in a jail in the community.

A few participants in the interviews discussed how the processes to access medical transport, once they had left the community, were complex and frustrating. This was especially concerning if a medical appointment was missed or changed,

I think a lot of people leave their communities for medical reasons and can't get back because they've missed their appointment. Or they've made their appointment and they can't get through (to medical transport services) to get back to their community (Interview 15).

One interview participant (Interview 3), who experienced hidden homelessness in her community, discussed becoming homeless in Thomp-

son after being transported there for mental health assessment (she had attempted suicide). She missed the arranged transport back to her community. She claimed her medical escort took her out drinking. Soon after her medical stay funding expired, she began living on the street and then at the shelter.

#### *You can't get no rest*

Several participants had been experiencing homelessness in Thompson for many, many years. One of these participants spoke of his efforts in his early twenties to work while living at the shelter,

... but while I was homeless, I was working at Safeway (laughs)...Uh... sometimes it was hard, right, it's like... sometimes you get into arguments, that... in there [the shelter]. Yeah. Mhm. Sometimes there's fights in there and... stuff like that ... (Interview 9).

A few participants spoke about how living at the shelter interrupts sleep, and encourages turning to alcohol to cope. *It's hard living there you can't sleep. You can't get no rest, no you just have so drink (to) sleep* (Interview 1). Meaning using alcohol aided in coping with the conditions in the shelter.

One participant discussed the difficulty he had sustaining recovery, *"I just tried quitting before on my own but I just...I had nothing to do. All I had around were my friends and they are drinking"* (Interview 2).

A few participants spoke about being puzzled by criteria for admission at the shelter. This participant described being told they were not homeless and sent away,

Even the, homeless shelter there, you have to be in for a certain time ... and, I slept there for a while, they told me I wasn't homeless, so they turned me away..., but I used to go stay at my brother-in-law's near to the kennel, and he stays in a little abandoned trailer out there, and there's a couch, so I walked all the way over to the dog kennel just to go sleep and come back in

the morning. Well, it's the same thing as Cross Lake. I was in — they said I was capable of doing this stuff, well, it was almost the same thing. Well, "we know you ... like we know, we saw you around, you had a job, you're not homeless." So, there's just, kind of, falling in between .....just watch you, we can watch you struggle, and you can get back up, but you're not sleeping here tonight and we're not helping you out, we're not, so. (Interview 12).

There were two participants who stated they were happy living at the shelter. A notable thing they shared in common was neither had had a place to call their own (securely housed) for many years (since adolescence) and had limited to no contact with or support from family. One participant stated he was alright staying there because he was accustomed to living in close quarters "I was used to it" (Interview 6). Another participant (Interview 3) spoke about her relationship with one of the staff and how she liked the food in the shelter.

#### *I don't like alcohol*

The majority of participants in interviews had been impacted by loved ones or others who had problems with alcohol or they themselves had or were currently struggling with alcohol problems. Participants talked about witnessing violence during their childhood and adolescence that was associated with alcohol use by caregivers. They also spoke of caregivers who were inattentive and/or absent due to their substance use. For example, participants spoke about lack of supervision, missing school and sleepless nights resulting from their caregiver's alcohol and drug use. Substance use also contributed to trauma, including experiences of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse in their homes and in the community.

Some participants spoke of alcohol being introduced to them within the family. One participant stated "...they handed me a bottle" (Interview

1) when he returned home at age 14 to his family from foster care. Several participants' early life experiences with alcohol precipitated their homelessness. This was clearly portrayed by one participant who described being introduced to substance use at 12 years of age. "When I became an alcoholic, I became violent. Fighting these people who pick on me" (Interview 5). She entered into intermittent homeless from mid-adolescence.

Alcohol was also a factor in seeking acceptance in relationships with peers. Several participants described conflicts over money, associated with their parent's alcohol use and overcrowded living conditions. These conflicts caused their transition into homelessness. Alcohol was also discussed as a barrier in relationships and a reason to stay away from family, "It's my alcoholism that keeps me away from going to bother my family." (Interview 1); "Uh...drank too much and they didn't want — they didn't want me inside the house, so..." (Interview 13).

Only one participant gave alcohol as a reason for not wanting to return to the community, "no alcohol there" (Interview 2). Another participant stated returning to the community made staying in recovery impossible "I couldn't take it no more" (Interview 6). This relapse prompted her children to be taken into care again. For some participants alcohol was an ongoing concern, alongside overcrowding, in her home,

Like, 'cause I don't like alcohol — And we don't drink, like, ever. And I was thinking about having a few drinks on Friday...And then I'm, like, 'you know what, I don't even crave drinking,' but I just wanted to have a drink, you know. Holidays are coming up. But then, having to deal with alcohol and I've been dealing with it all week at home. I don't even want to drink (laughs) (Interview 14).

One participant had been in recovery, but was discharged to the shelter with poor results, "Boredom. All my friends were drinking, and the second time I lasted two weeks. I just got bored stay-

ing there, so I just went out and started drinking heavily,” (Interview 2). Several participants in interviews suggested more alcohol treatment was needed. This participant stated when they were asked about what was needed to prevent homelessness “stop drinking”. Participants spoke about the need for more community support for those who are in recovery in the community, including Alcoholics Anonymous and harm reduction approaches, and for housing specifically.

### Focus Groups

The purpose of the focus groups was to share preliminary data generated by the interviews and preliminary codes. Thus, the focus groups, with those with lived experience of homelessness and service providers, were held after the interviews using LSB, the data transcription and the first round of coding. In them we, the researchers, discussed the codes and augmented some of the findings, adding to and complementing participant’s perspectives. Participants provided validation of the majority of the six themes discussed by those in the interviews, supporting their claims about housing issues; impact of colonization; racism; issues about services, programs and supports; and relationships. Though the focus group participants did not address domestic violence in depth, concerns about becoming homeless due to violence, youth/gang violence issues in communities, and experiences of bullying were discussed.

As discussed above, the focus groups had a mix of people with lived experience and/or service providers. In Thompson there were two focus groups held, one with primarily people with lived experience and another that was held with primarily representatives from housing, social agencies, education, youth service, child and family services. In NCN one focus group was held with a mix of people with lived experience and service providers.

The design of focus groups in NCN and Thompson were very different. In NCN participants

engaged in a large group discussion and joined in interactive exercises focused on determining their priorities based on the data that were shared. In Thompson the participants were divided into smaller groups with a research assistant facilitator at each table. These conversations were recorded, which resulted in a lot of details from individual participants. This allowed for the use of their own words in each of the sections below. Information from the NCN focus groups, where all of the participants identified as Indigenous, was gathered from flip charts and notes and has been summarized in the lived experience section. Again, this follows our understanding, based on Thistle’s (2017) Definition of Indigenous Homelessness where Indigenous individuals and communities all have lived experience of one or more of the dimensions of homelessness resulting from colonization.

We have divided the data from the focus groups into two sections. The first section represents the voices of those with lived experience. This is followed by service providers. Data from the focus groups is summarized along with café results in Figures 6, 7, 9 & 10.

### Voices of Those with Lived Experience

#### Relationships

Participants in focus groups also spoke of the restoration that can happen when the importance of relationship with self, family, culture and the land are taken in view. In NCN participants spoke of the meaning of home and family. Home is “where the heart is — home is love”. They also spoke about a need for community members to get involved and join together and connect with culture and spirit around the housing issues. In Thompson, one participant talked about connecting with the people, land, culture and spirit as a necessary part of the journey to recovery,

Have more gatherings instead of this coming together on a funeral or a wedding. Anywhere

you can find a group of people, we got mother earth, we can go out there. We have, we all have made mistakes in life, nobody is perfect. Have a strong belief in yourself. Be positive, just like having a strong belief in yourself... Have an open mind, I don't know how to be more caring and loving, not to be selfish. Not to forget I have a big family. Not to be ashamed. Accept yourself for who you are. Not to forget your teachings from your grandparents. Be a giver, not a taker. Keep in touch with your creator, your best friend. I have experienced these things and my language makes me strong, even being in the residential school did make me strong, that's one thing I never lost. My dignity, and my language no matter what I went through, I kept it. That's what helped me pull through.

### **Housing**

NCN focus group participants discussed lack of housing, the fact that many are living in overcrowded housing and in unacceptable housing conditions in the community. Participants also stated "homelessness is progressive" meaning it will only get worse if conditions remain the same.

NCN participants spoke about the many people they know who are without their own place to stay in the community. They discussed how people in the community go from house to house. How, people will show up and visit and "wait until the host asks if they have a place to sleep". People will stay one to two nights until "it gets to be too much" for their host to cope with and move to the next place hoping to be able to stay.

One focus group participant in Thompson shared her experiences living in overcrowded housing and how housing conditions forced her to place her son out of her care,

You know what I did when I was overcrowded at my sister's house, I used to live in the living room and there were about 4 or 5 adults living there, there were like 5 kids, I kept my clothes on the shelf in the laundry room and in bags. I

used to sleep in the living room with my son, and I had to send my son away for school to live with his dad cause it was overcrowded in there. I lived like that for like 3 years, I think maybe more. Up until my auntie bought a camper it was summer and she asked me if I wanted to rent it. So, I could have my own privacy, and she said yeah, she charged me \$200 (Focus group participant in Thompson).

Another participant in Thompson described her experiences seeking housing while she was homeless. She is a wheelchair user and described living in housing that was not accessible, because accessible housing is rare in Thompson,

I've been asking for so much help from people, from workers, from mental health, from social workers, anything that I can get my hands on, even like housing through Ma-Mow-We-Tak, anywhere that I could get resources. All of which, they got applications and everything, doctors wrote me letters, and I gave them all, КТС, МКО, anywhere I could think, the only housing, like it was Highland Towers but that was unfit for me to live in. So, they told me to move out. Cause I have to go up and down the stairs with my, with no legs, and I had to slide down (stairs) with my bottom), just to go shopping. Cause most of the time the elevators wouldn't work, so it (stairs) was so filthy, like so filthy you wouldn't believe and um, I don't know that's the only place I could ever find and um, like these workers have been running around finding me disability housing, but there's nothing available.

In addition, focus group participants in NCN discussed how people are sometimes staying in the community, forgoing education, jobs and opportunities, because they do not want to lose their home. There are also people who choosing to leave their housing so other family members have a place to live. This can sometimes mean moving into a cabin in the bush or going to the

city. Focus group participants in NCN stated many people are commuting from Thompson to work in NCN. They also discussed the need of housing for singles and elders who don't need or want to live in residential care. A participant dreamed of 'retiring in a community that meets your needs'.

### **Impact of Colonialism**

The majority of participants in the NCN focus group called for something to be done to increase awareness and understanding of the history of housing for First Nations.

It also stems from, you know, coming from a First Nations, like one time where we're nomadic. So, we were able to build a cabin anywhere as long as we were able to, you know, house our families, hunt, then trap and fish, like that right? Yeah, on the land. But now that, you know, after the flood came and then there was devastation to the land, so you really couldn't build anything anymore without having somebody's authorization, or you had to get a building permit through the province and stuff like that. So that too stopped people from becoming self-determined, self-sustaining, cause now they have to do these other things, to meet the standards of building (Focus group participant in Thompson).

Another participant in spoke about their experience shopping in Thompson,

I got my EI at that time. I had four hundred and five dollars on me. I didn't take a cart, I had a bag right, and they thought I was stealing so they put me in jail for three hours. And I was sober. Like, I even showed them my money...

### **Services, Programs and Supports**

NCN focus group participants spoke mainly of the need for improving housing services, but they also spoke to the need for a place for the

homeless in the community. Participants talked about needing a database for the homeless in the community. They also wanted housing information made more accessible and suggested it be translated into Cree. They also spoke to the importance of innovations in programs in NCN such as the parent removal program.<sup>3</sup>

A youth participant living in Thompson shared his experiences and problems with housing instability and his single parent dad's alcohol use. He experienced food insecurity, isolation and lack of supports,

I cannot count the years from high school, um my dad just got in a divorce and after that everything changed with um, housing, ah, how I, how I'm doing in school. And a couple years after the divorce, my dad got an apartment, lost it, lost his ah, home. So, we lived in an apartment for a couple years, and while in the apartment we didn't have any food, we didn't have any clothing, ah...a lot of parties being there, which affected my schooling and while I was in the apartment. I was always being kicked out to my friends, to my auntie. My other friends, back and forth and ever since that I've ...It was a struggle for me so... Every time I would go, every time I would come home I. I come home from school; I would come home to nothing. No tv. Just being alone was hard. So, after that I've done drugs for a while which got me kicked out. And ever since, I just haven't had any clothing, and it was a struggle (Focus group participant in Thompson).

In Thompson participants also called for improving services for the homeless. Participants discussed the lack of places to gather in Thompson and suggested supports that would help,

Should be a drop-in center with(and) a social worker there, even like people like our head workers, people who could offer mental health, people that could really listen to you, what's

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<sup>3</sup>NCN Family and Community Wellness Centre Inc

going on with your life, you know. Instead of just sitting there and looking at the bare walls.

Participants spoke about the importance of building relationship in the helping process,

The only way that you could understand a person is by listening to them, by what they have to say, and, and now you know like, you gotta stick to listening to them... it's just like they will say ahmm, yup, ya I understand, yeah really right. They don't really understand me. I'm just talking to you here, not even twenty minutes and you understand me already... they just write it down, well ya, whatever ya...and I get their impression, ok you don't give a shit, see you later (Focus group participant in Thompson).

Similarly, a participant in the focus group commented on the need for service providers to have specific kinds of skills,

I guess being able to meet people, again the harm reduction, the people need to start being educated in that model. Have an actual drop-in centre, an actual place to meet and have coffee, any time of the day. Not just at the homeless shelter, and that's not even adequate, right (Focus group participant in Thompson)?

Several participants in the focus group for those with lived experience in Thompson spoke about problems with medical travel resulting in homelessness. *"Well the office was closed, they dropped her off, okay, and she had to wait outside"*. Meaning she was homeless for that night or until she could find a ride back to the community. Another participant also spoke to the trouble people have found with the medical transportation system,

I think a lot of people leave out of their communities for medical reasons and can't get back because they've missed their appointment. Or they've made their appointments and can't get through to where they are supposed to get back to their communities (Focus group participant in Thompson).

The challenges dealing with the medical transportation system were also described by this participant, whose paperwork was not in order. This participant described the automated system that gives them a number to wait on the phone to report missing paperwork, changes or to try to arrange accommodation or transportation back to their community,

I was number thirty-six. (I) waited for two and a half hours on a phone just to go to my appointment. But they wouldn't pay for my room, or you know, hard to go get back on the bus. And that was every day for three months and a half, I had to go through cause they didn't have paperwork done (Focus group participant in Thompson).

Although there are many gaps in services, as discussed by participants, a participant spoke to the availability of services in Thompson as compared with what is available in outlying communities,

There's less resources in a lot of reserves. In Thompson, you know there are a lot of resources you can turn to, that's what I'm slowly finding out, but that's where my partner is from. Split Lake there's very little, very little resources to go on.

### Focus Groups with Service Providers **Relationships**

A focus group participant wondered whether predetermined processes overlooked the importance of relationships and the culture in the design of policies for housing the homeless. People develop relationships with others who are homeless and will forgo housing if they are unable to continue to those relationships,

They (agencies) need to have that understanding of what is appropriate and what needs to be allowed and what kind of rules are we making for people? And are we causing homelessness because we have determined what housing looks

like for everybody? (Focus group participant in Thompson).

A focus group participant in Thompson claimed the homeless community is family, *“when you’re on the street and your people say they’re a family there, they help each other”* (Focus group participant in Thompson).

A focus group participant, *“Stop calling it a homeless shelter, yeah it’s a home, it’s people’s home, stop calling it homeless... shelter”* (Focus group participant in Thompson).

Several focus group participants in Thompson discussed how connection to the land was related to food security and belonging. People regularly connect around food and traditional practices. They are connecting around food, and also connecting to having access to what they need on the land. This is evidenced in the following comments from participants,

Yah we saw some poor people. They had a house, and they went fishing, ice fishing and they cooked fish. It smelled good.

I used to like snaring rabbits when I was growing up. It was fun and it was so nice in the bush.

Yup, when I was growing up everyone was working. My era, you know. Everyone was going to school in my era. Except for a few that were sick or lived off the land. That time, they were still living off the land.

These participants concluded that offering people in Thompson an opportunity to be outside and having a ‘big barbecue’, ‘lots of food you guys, that’s what brings people out’ ...

### **Housing**

A few focus group participants in Thompson discussed housing as a key determinant of ‘good life’ and well-being, as a basic need,

We don’t have housing, that’s Maslow’s whole pyramid, right? The bottom of the pyramid is when you have stable housing. And then the

next step is that you have to have food, not necessarily from a food bank, but you have to know that you have food every day. Till you know that you have housing, till you know that you have food, you don’t go up the ladder to meet those other needs, being educated, to get healing. It is the housing and it is the food. (Focus group participant in Thompson).

This service provider in Thompson described what she has witnessed in communities, validating the information shared in interviews and the focus group in NCN. It is not about families living together, or whether people are taking care of their homes, it is about the availability of housing and the fit of the housing for the needs of the family and community,

Well the solution is a house, is housing, right? ...I go on the reserve and I see it, right? You go to a home where people, somebody would go, oh my god there’s six families that live there. That’s okay, that’s okay six families live there, right? But why is it that they have to live in a home that has no insulation(or) Improper insulation. They have venting systems in these homes that are prefabbed, brought up there... the venting insulation is not proper. If you take, go to my home, where I don’t really cook. I cook a pot of something, this and that. In a home where there’s four or five families that’s just, one family, a large family that’s cooking a big pot of stew or a big pot of caribou stew, whatever all that condensation. The houses aren’t built with proper ventilation. And then what does that cause? Here’s your word, homelessness, right?

Another focus group participant in Thompson spoke about the claims that it is people’s neglect of their homes that is the cause of housing problems on reserves. Again, this speaks about the quality and design of the houses being a poor fit with actual needs,

...because I have a house... deteriorates, they better take better care of it. No, we should

be providing better homes that are properly ventilated, properly insulated for the area, because if you live on muskeg you have to have a mold resistant home, right? And that to me is a huge issue, I, I swear... (Focus group participant in Thompson).

Another participant spoke about the idea that people can just go home. *“(T)hey can’t go home because there’s no housing in the communities. So there’s no forward, they are just stuck”.*

### **Impact of Colonialism**

The disruption of the Indigenous systems for family and living is a fundamental cause of homelessness. It is evident in several ways, the way housing was built, the way the systems, the structures were not designed based on Indigenous principles of reciprocity, spirituality, respect, interconnectedness, and commonality.

Um, I heard an agency comment once that even when they were able to assist people in permanent housing, their family culture, their community was that of the homelessness. So, it became very difficult for them to be asked to disengage from what they saw as their family support. Even if I have the ability to obtain housing for the one person and they wanted to have their partner and what they perceived was their family community over their space, which wasn’t allowed by the landlord, they became homeless again. As well as they couldn’t have their community, their family in their space, they didn’t see the space as worthy. They would rather be homeless in a shelter or in the bush or whatever their space to stay with the community.

For one focus group participant, today’s housing conditions didn’t exist pre-colonization,

And there was not one house that was molded down, right? There was never any issue, right? It lasted for years and years and years. And they didn’t have heating, like electricity, didn’t have

right? And yet now, somehow, they think that these prefabricated houses are the answer, right? (Focus group participant in Thompson).

Another participant speaks about the ongoing effects of colonialism,

Even as we talk, going into the walk-in clinic. Why can’t that be more culturally appropriate for an area that’s... why can’t that just be different? Why can’t there be different medicines? Why can’t there be opportunities? More, more opportunities. Even to go into a hospital you’re going to have larger rooms if we’re going to engage a whole family, and elders, and what’s perceived as a person’s support system. So, really again, again it’s breaking those bonds, breaking those ideals. Reaching people on the street with healing opportunities, we have to disrupt trauma. (Focus group participant in Thompson).

Focus group participants shared their experiences with discrimination, ignoring them, or just not helping them to find housing. One stated that,

You know I saw him down the streets. He is an alcoholic. He is this and they are prejudging and they are saying all these things. Forget about what he went through or what she went through treatment or whatever...It... like nobody takes the time for homelessness, to talk to the homeless. To find out what is their story (Focus group participant Thompson).

### **Services, Programs and Supports**

Focus groups in Thompson confirmed that people experiencing homelessness encounter barriers accessing health services,

...and then the file builds up on the person. Now they’re the person that misses the appointments. They’re seen as, well, hey let’s try and give them a break they just didn’t show up. They’re not engaged. There has been a lot of interesting dialog about what it is for

somebody just to walk through the particular types of buildings, in order to make those appointments, are they even comfortable? When we talk about structures, so really meeting the person where they're at vs. asking them to come into a space where it's organic to us but absolutely uncomfortable to them (Focus group participant Thompson).

This participant spoke about the barriers in getting access to the clinic which is located in the plaza mall in Thompson. This location is problematic as people are stereotyped as being homeless by management, security and businesses. This limits their access to healthcare. This is confirmed by this focus participant, who spoke of how stigma toward addictions blocks people from accessing health care in a downtown clinic,

So, they can't get into the plaza. Well in the plaza is the only clinic. So, they lose their medical. They lose their mental health. They lose everything. They need medication, for say schizophrenia ... They lose it all because, they can't get into the building and if they do get into the building, they smell a little off or they may smell like alcohol or like they've been using drugs but, they, no one's helped them get off. But then they're kicked out. So they're kept, in a state of homelessness (Focus group participant Thompson).

A couple of service providers in the focus group in Thompson discussed their ideas about what needs to change, including concerns that service providers have preconceived notions and defined paths that are ill-fitted for the needs of people experiencing homelessness,

We have to unhinge this normal word; we have to look at the continuum of people on it, on each, on their own path. And we really need to change language; we need to change ideas or we're not going to get to those roots (Focus group participant Thompson).

Several focus group participants stated that services need to recognize people's pathways into homelessness are not all the same and there needs to be time to hear their stories and respond to their needs meaningfully,

Everybody has a different story. Not everybody drinks for the same reason. Not everybody uses drugs for the same reason. Not everybody loses their children for the same reason. And not everybody is homeless for the same reason. Um, I guess a, being able to meet people, again the harm reduction. (Focus group, Thompson).

A focus group participant in Thompson wondered if a new understanding of being homeless was needed. Being transient may be a way to cope with the lack of safety in one's living situations. This participant believed that this coping mechanism is often missed in the helping process,

What if being transient is safer in the person's mind than any structure they're given. Say they go to the children's aid or child protection and that occurs and then they go here and that occurs ... But they find that when they're homeless it makes more sense. It's more genuine. It's a space that portrays what it is. Whereas a structure, portraying a space of safety, that might not exist. So, bringing in the mental health aspect, bringing all the recovery comes from an upside-down perspective. That safety doesn't even exist in any structure towards banking, library cards, driver's license, job ownership. It doesn't even make sense, if it's even a structure that you can buy into. And yet, in order to be successful, that is what we are told to do. Perhaps that is what we all have to understand. How damaging that is and why people might not be successful when we try to move them onto the next level. (Focus group participant in Thompson).

One participant discussed how someone just simply taking time to listen to homeless people's stories changed their (own) thinking and approach,

I had a preconceived idea of who you were, and of who you were in this homeless shelter. But when I sat down and they became more human to me. And I know that sounds horrible but I let them have a voice... And when I heard that voice, I realized, holy sheesh, I got it all wrong. It is not about helping anyone, it's about listening to them and what I can do to provide, to get the services you need. I mean if you listen to them, it changes the stigma and I don't think that happens at all in Thompson Manitoba. The easiest thing for people to drive by and go, oh Jesus Christ, right? I'm spending my tax dollar money on you, you know? Like, it is easy for people to do that but it is so not easy, to stop your vehicle and say excuse me do you need a ride, right? Can I help you? Can I buy you coffee? You don't have a coat on, can you stay here? I'll go get you a coat, right? I mean people don't do that... (Focus group participant Thompson).

They also talked about the need for the community to have more awareness and for service providers to have understanding and skills for responding to substance use problems,

Um, what's missing I guess is just the, um, compassion. Some people don't have this. They are all for themselves. The empathy we need for understanding where one is coming from. Again, with this, the one individual saying about listening to people's stories (Focus group participant in Thompson)

Another focus group participant in Thompson spoke to need for a better understanding of addictions amongst services providers and the broader community,

Yeah, I guess one of the things is that providers and employers need to have a better understanding about alcoholism. People look down at people having addiction problems. They look down on the street people because they do not want to understand that alcoholism and drug addiction is a disease... that person is a

human being like you and I. And maybe does not have, or cannot afford some of the services that we enjoy... We need to have more services ... to these people that need that help. While I say she has been to a treatment center five times already, what else can we do? They just all have to keep trying. We cannot give up on people. (Focus group participant Thompson).

### Community Cafés in Thompson and Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation

As discussed above, there were two community cafés, one in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and one in Thompson to share final analysis of data and receive feedback to address homelessness and potential future actions. The NCN café included 10 participants and 15 service provider attended the café in Thompson. Each café is discussed below.

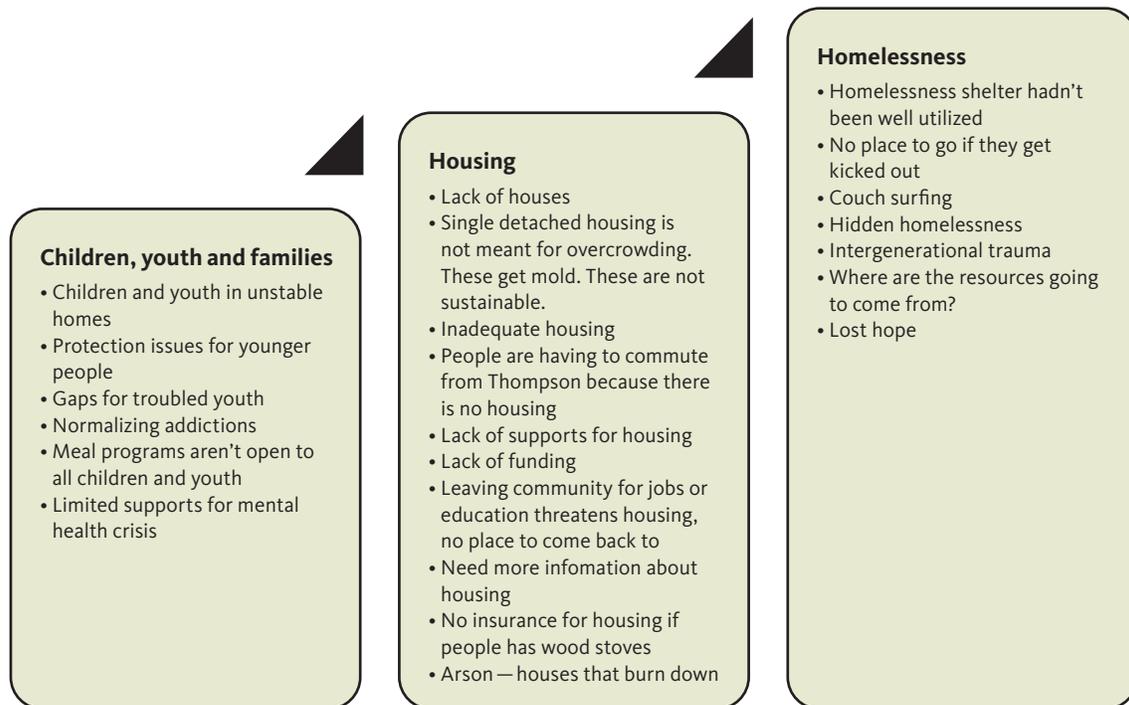
#### **Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation**

Participants in the community café listed several supportive programs and services that were identified by café participants (see Figure 8). Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation community café participants included: ATEC (Atoskiwin Training and Employment Centre); Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation Family and Community Wellness Centre; a women's shelter; Nelson House Medicine Lodge, the nursing station, and RCMP.

Housing and hidden homelessness were primary in the minds of participants in the NCN café. Housing scarcity and lack of sustainable housing were identified in NCN as current challenges (see Figure 6). One participant stated, "*Single detached housing is not meant for overcrowding. These get mold. These are not sustainable.*" As a result, many houses have been abandoned due to their poor condition.

Hidden homelessness was also seen as a key issue in the community. There are too many young couples who cannot obtain housing, so their only choice is to live with extended family.

FIGURE 6 Challenges: NCN Focus Groups & Community Café



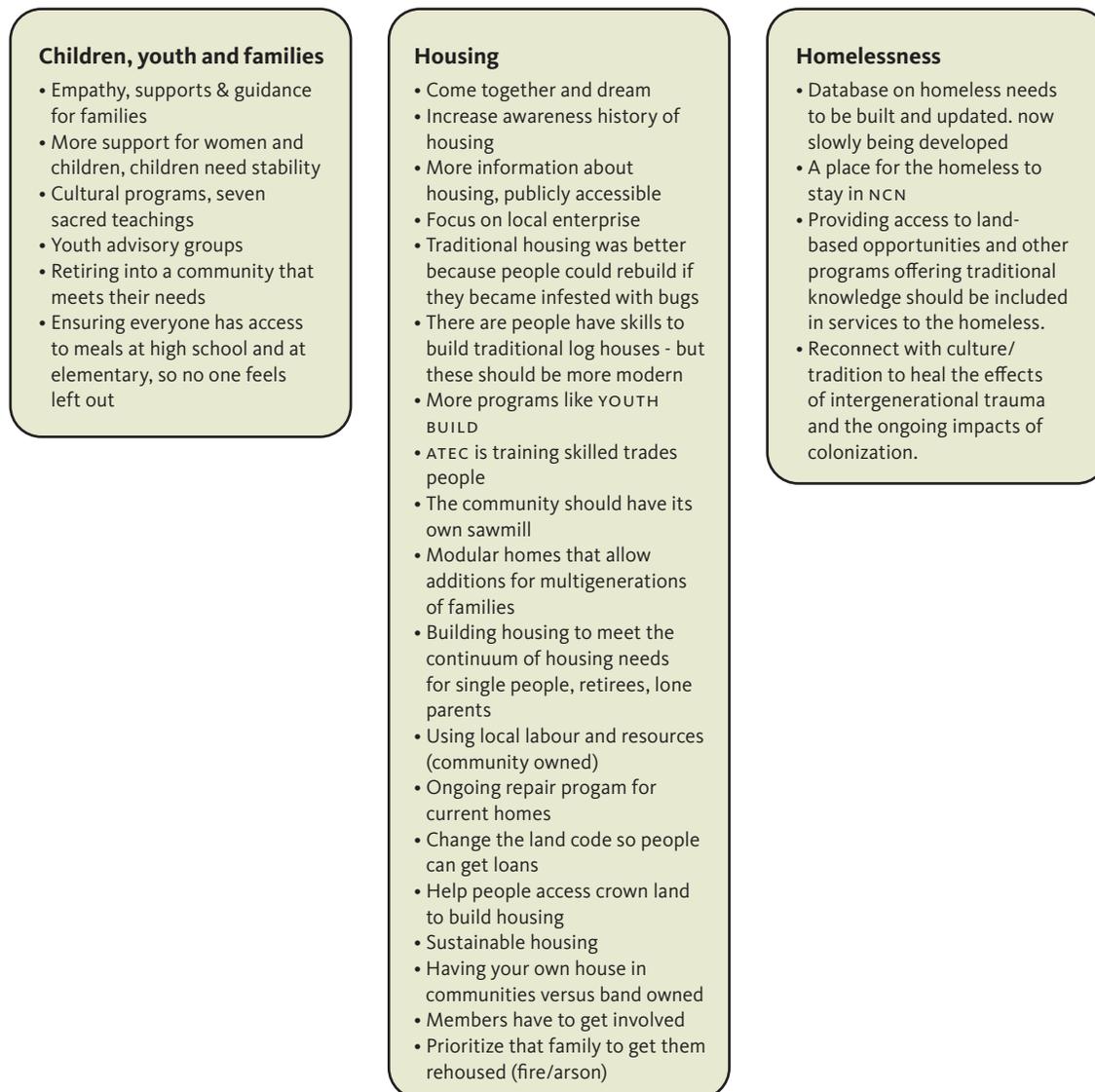
NCN café participants shared their observations about the increasing numbers of young people who are experiencing homelessness, they stated “homelessness is progressive” and mainly the result of having “no place to go”. Participants discussed people in the community who had ‘lost hope’ due to the housing situation. There is currently no place in the community for people to go if they get kicked out by family.

NCN participants discussed that there are limited to “no services for those who are homeless and moving from house to house” in communities. Café participants discussed a homeless shelter had been set up, but it hadn't been well utilized and had burned down in 2019.

NCN participants were concerned about the ways CFS works in caring for children and youth. A significant number of children in care have a high number of rotations, and this means they live in unstable homes. According to some participants this means they are homeless. Parti-

pants were concerned about the effects of housing instability on children as, “children need relations, need stability”. Among the several issues, participants were concerned about, the limited staff where there are too few supports for families were high on their list. They called for more guidance for improving family relationships, working with youth and preventing family violence. They noted this has been brought to the surface in several recent problems with youth in the community linked with youth involvement in arson and substance use. Participants identified some issues in young populations that are becoming common practices. This also discussed by NCN participants when they reflected on the problem of “normalizing addictions”, which was perceived as threat to the present and future well-being in the community. In addition, participants expressed their worries about children and youth, as they saw too many being exposed to different family negative dynamics and issues in the community.

FIGURE 7 Future Directions: NCN Focus Groups and Community Café



There are not enough alternatives for people without home, it was confirmed by the café participants where they stated, ‘people with no place to go should have a place to stay in NCN’. They also thought that additional strategies should be accessible for them, such as a database on the homeless in the community. Another strategy could be the support for people to build their homes. Several Café participants in NCN shared they have the skills to build log houses and there were also several youths in the café who were in

training for construction trades that is the result of Youth Build partnerships with Atoskiwin. Some participants who had been recently housed in trailers that had been brought in from hydro developments in the region. NCN was also reportedly working on a new strategic plan for housing at the time of the café. Several café participants had recently attended meetings to discuss changes to housing processes in the community.

NCN participants had a similar vision [A1] and hoped for an opportunity to bring people

“together and dream” about a different future for housing in the community (Figure 7).

Participants in NCN thought providing the homeless people access to land-based opportunities and other programs offering traditional knowledge should be included in services to the homeless.

The following table shows participants ideas for changes in the community to address issues for housing, homelessness and child, youth and families.

### Thompson

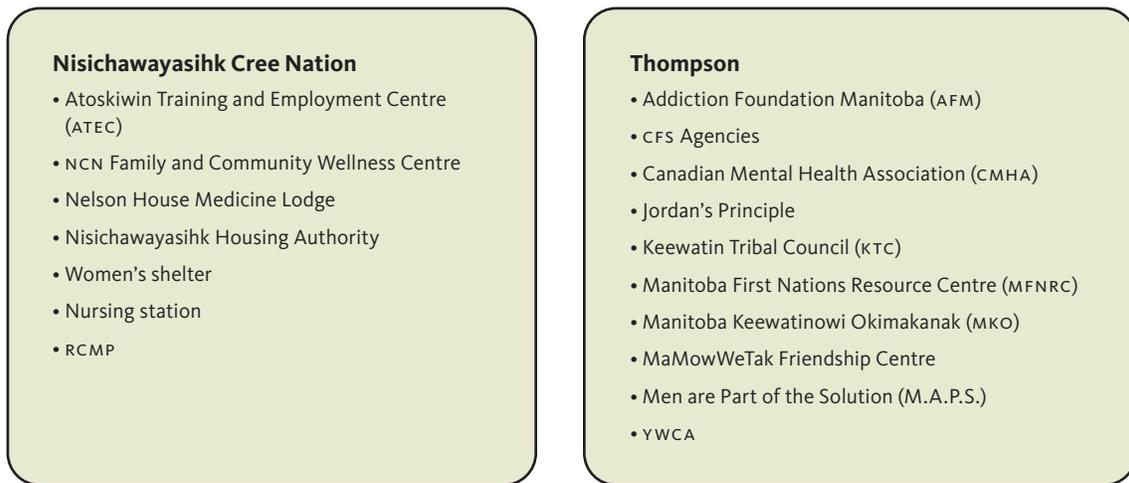
In Thompson participants focused mainly on the services and programs for individuals and families in Thompson and surrounding communities. They identified several programs and services that were important (see Figure 8) including: AFM (Addiction Foundation Manitoba), child and family enhancement programs, CMHA mental health housing, Jordan’s Principle (housed with Keewatin Tribal Council), MaMowWeTak Friendship Centre, MacDonald Youth Services), MFNRC (Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre) educational incentives, M.A.P.S. (Men Are Part of the Solution), and the YWCA life skills and transitional housing programs.

With regard to housing they thought the municipality should transfer existing and available infrastructure (abandoned buildings) for the development of housing and create a bylaw to protect affordable housing. Affordability of living and housing and the lack of subsidized space for youth and families were identified by the Thompson participants. They discussed how housing in Thompson is mainly dominated by the private market that has requirements that present real barriers to people with low-incomes. Participants in Thompson also saw the need to Increase municipal capacity generally for housing regulation to protect affordable housing.

Participants called for the province to overhaul the rental assistance program, a provincial program that subsidizes rents for low-income, and to create mechanisms to reduce barriers in rent processes.

They suggested there should be more education, and supports generally to aid in accessing housing. Participants suggested creating more affordable and efficient ways to build housing and to develop a program to help people access Crown land to build housing. They identified a need for sustainable housing that is moisture and mold free. Further, the Thompson partici-

FIGURE 8 Important Programs and Services in NCN and Thompson



participants viewed the limited crisis response when houses burn down in outlying communities as a gap, some were surprised by how long interview participants had waited to be rehoused and that some had not be rehoused after a fire (See Figure 9 for summary of challenges identified in the focus groups and cafés).

Issues regarding families and individuals being unprepared to transition to urban centres were identified. These included having a lack of skills/education, a lack of financial management skills, and lack of documentation as challenges. Thompson participants thought there should be a *“municipal program to help people get ID”*.

Long waitlists for outreach support, lack of services to help with housing and homelessness, and lack of resources generally for overcrowding in Thompson and outlying communities were identified as significant problems. Several challenges were identified in Thompson for families including the lack stable programs and coordinated services for families between communities. Similar to NCN, they identified the need for more family supports and education to help parents. There were gaps in respite for families and the lack of substance use treatment programs accommodating families.

Participants in Thompson called for efforts *“...to stop early birth rate amongst youths”*. Ideas shared including engaging youth advisory groups to understand the service needs for youth. *“Establish centres for free services for adolescents”*, *“safe youth hostels”*, and *“cultural programs for youth”*. Connecting up with *“cultural programs happening in other communities”* was discussed. Thompson participants thought mandatory preparation and planning was needed for all youth aging out from CFS care. Youth should have access to employment programs and supports. Also, participants in the Thompson Café thought there should be more access to mental health and substance use treatment through provision of mobile services to the outlying communities.

Thompson Café participants saw the need for “a collaborative shared network” with a database

about housing programs, services and supports. They also called for a regional plan for housing and homelessness. Calls made by participants in Thompson included:

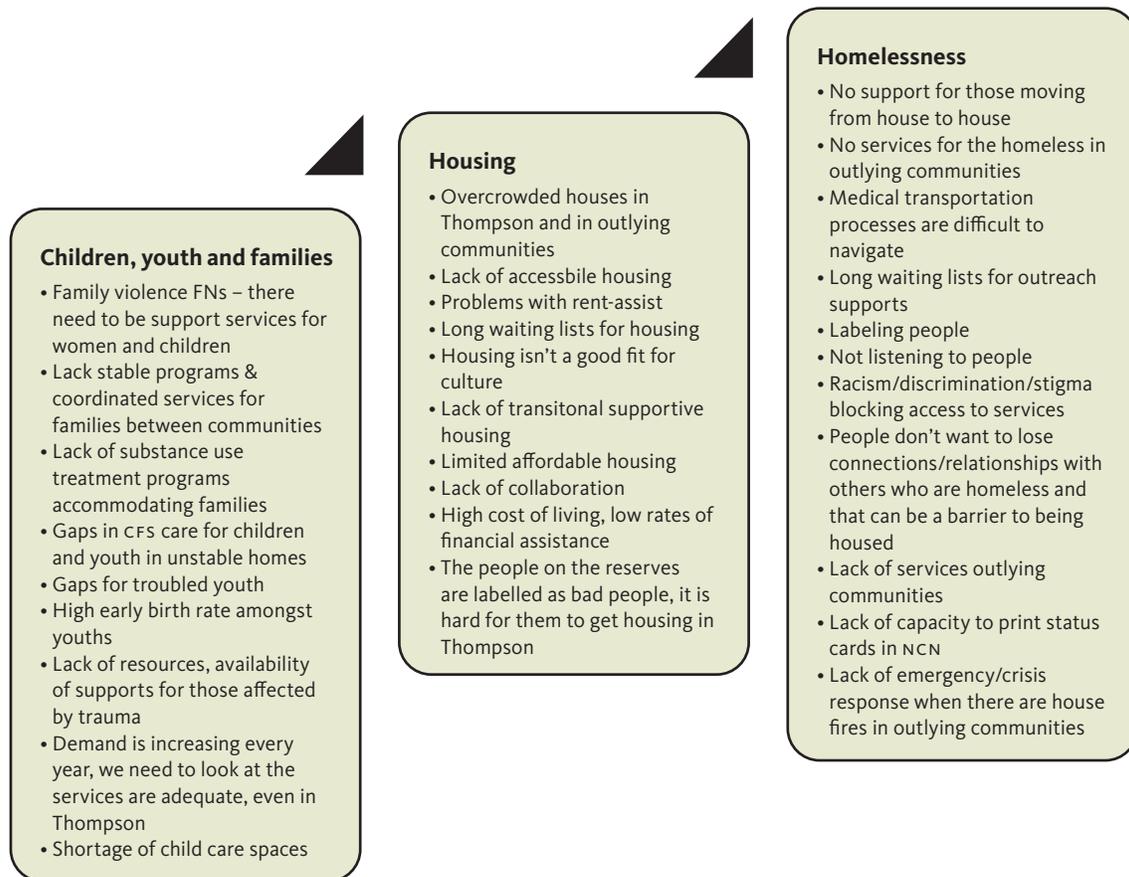
- “Demand is increasing every year, we need to look at whether the services are adequate, even in Thompson”.
- “Build a database for every organization, therefore shared networks know what is available”.
- “Publicize support services”.

Participants repurposing existing structures where additional programs could be implemented including educational, mental health programs, or sports activities. For example, they talk about *“24-hour schools — a community school”* where community members have access to use the space in the school (outside regular hours) to develop programs and services. They also asked for targeted mentorship programs for women and youth, and *“an art collective.”*

Other challenges identified for services included lack of resources, and the availability of supports for those affected by trauma. Participants identified the need for all service providers for homeless populations to have access to training addictions, trauma and cultural safety was discussed in Thompson. Gaps were also identified in medical transportation indicating people find the processes for their appointments are difficult to navigate. People can be stranded in urban centres If paperwork is missing or circumstances change where appointments are missed or delayed. For some this has led into homelessness.

Participants discussed how the individualistic approach, which is very different from the Indigenous collectivist wellbeing, causes cultural disruptions. Indigenous relationships among the homeless population are very strong, and people recognize each other as family. Thus, it is difficult for people to separate their own needs from the needs of others and move to a house when

FIGURE 9 Challenges: Thompson Focus Groups and Community Café

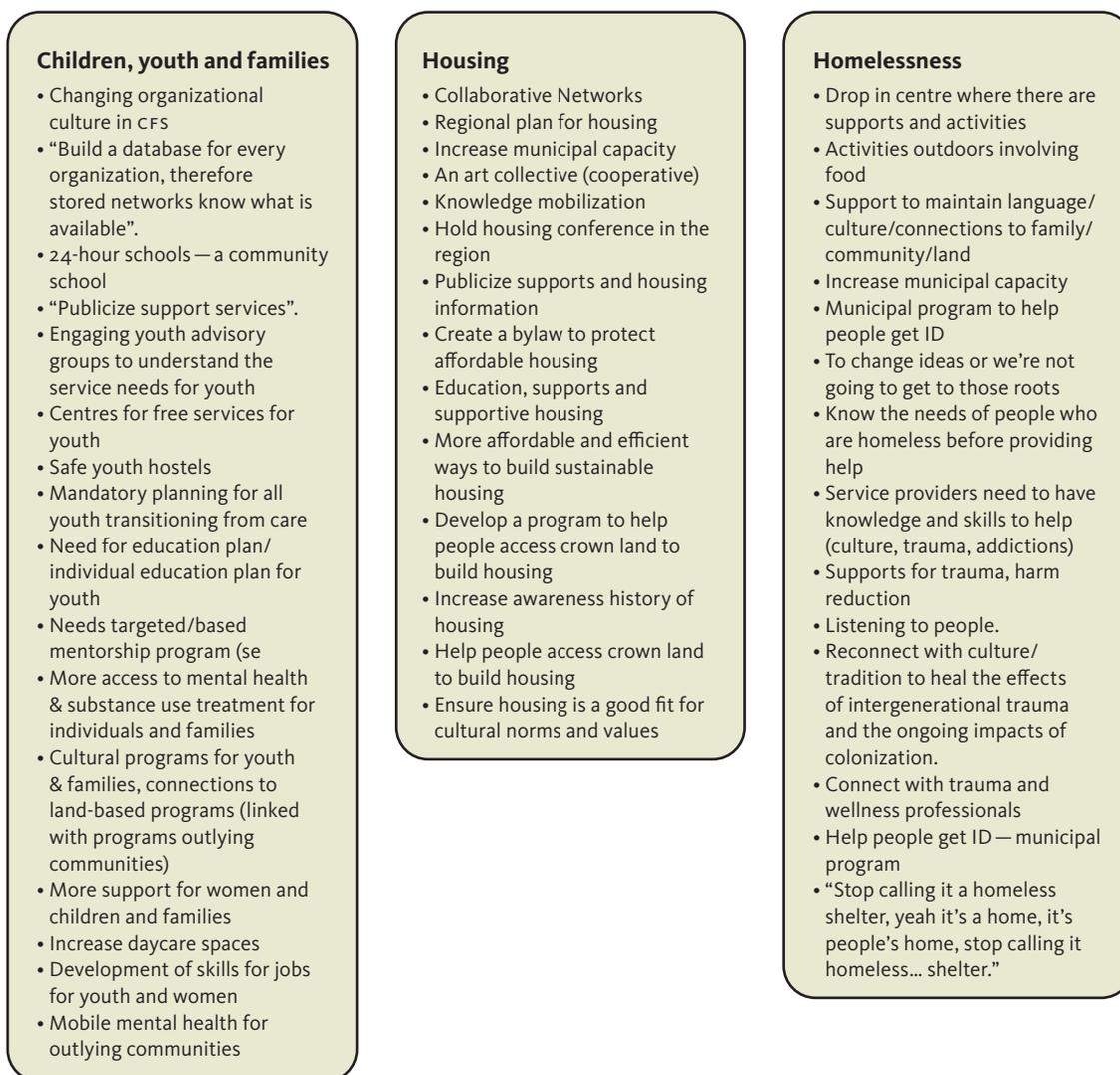


their family is still on the street. This becomes a barrier to housing. This theme also surfaced in the interviews and in the focus groups above. An example that supports this came from a café participant who discussed what was given was a “man who got his own place, but did not set up furniture because he felt guilty” that he had been housed and others he cared about, his family, were still on the street.

Another example of the collectivist wellbeing perspective was shown when participants in the café shared examples where a homeless person or group had stepped in to help them in situations where they were hurt or threatened. They called for efforts to “capture these stories” toward shifting the narrative about people who are homeless in Thompson.

Thompson café participants had many ideas about what needs to be done including building capacity and understanding broadly in services, in the community and in the region (summarized with focus group data in Figure 10). Some of their suggestions included the development of collaborative networks focused on improving access and coordination of programs and services to at-risk groups, housing, health and education. Other ideas included a municipal bylaw to promote and preserve affordable housing, a process for prioritizing people in need of housing, youth-based programming and supports, skill-based training for women and youth, increasing mobile supports to outlying communities, and cultural programs that are coordinated with all these communities (cultural exchange for youth).

FIGURE 10 Future Directions: Thompson Focus Groups and Community Café



Participants recommended a strategy to promote more involvement in regional cultural events.

### Summary of Findings

Relationships with others, community and the land were a recurrent theme in people’s stories. For several participants their dream of housing was also a dream of reconnecting to their culture, traditions and being a contributing member in their community. Quite a lot of participants in interviews and

focus groups talked about the days when they and others in their community were able to take care of each other. When young families were started the community built them a house. People also remembered there was no food insecurity because people could get what they needed from the land. Living in close quarters too was not a problem back then. They also discussed how some still had the skills to build their own log homes.

People talked about leaving their communities to access services, supports and programs and to

seek opportunities (e.g. employment, education, housing). Early exposure to substance use was commonly experienced. Alcohol had impacted the lives of the majority of participants and contributed to becoming and remaining homeless. The state of being homeless or returning to a community where there are few supports and services made recovery from substance use difficult. Those with vulnerabilities (e.g. trauma, mental illness, substance use), and limited resources (e.g. income, ID) were often pushed into homelessness when their efforts to seek help or opportunities collided with barriers in systems. Systemic inadequacies not only contributed to the downward spiral into homeless, but also to sustaining displacement from community and/or housing. Some systemic problems included service providers lack of skill sets for addressing culture, trauma, substance use and mental health problems and processes that were difficult to navigate and didn't give consideration to people's needs. Participants spoke often about how they had not been listened to.

The housing crisis in outlying communities was a central theme throughout interviews, focus and cafés. There is not enough housing and housing on the reserves has been ill designed for the climate and purposes and uses of the people in these communities. Poor design and scarcity of housing have contributed to overcrowded housing. These conditions have resulted in many houses being in a state of disrepair.

Housing has likewise been ill-designed for the needs and purposes of Indigenous people who move to Thompson. Lack of culturally appropriate housing showed up as a barrier for people transitioning into housing in Thompson. There are significant obstacles in application processes, long waitlists for housing and limited supports and transitional housing. Early experiences of housing instability and homelessness were commonly understood factors contributing to later vulnerability to homelessness. A lack of housing options for singles, lone parents, people living with mental health or substance use problems, retirees, women and youth seeking safety in communities was also recognized as contributing to homelessness and overcrowding in Thompson and surrounding communities.

The impact of colonialism showed up in numerous ways, often overlapping with other themes. Experiences of racism and stigma were also discussed as barriers to care, housing and employment. The Sixties Scoop, residential schools and associated intergenerational trauma, domestic violence, bullying, neglect, emotional and physical abuse were all too common factors in the experiences of people with lived experience of homelessness. Participants in NCN and in Thompson both discussed the importance of broader collaboration around housing issues in the region and educating one and all about the history of colonization and how it is linked with housing conditions and homelessness in the region.

# Analysis, Interpretation of Findings & Discussion

Canadian children begin believing Canada is the best and most beautiful of all countries, and the school's job is to reinforce this belief. This is done in face of the fact that the quality of life of natives is as low as that of the Third World (Adams, 1999, p. 39)

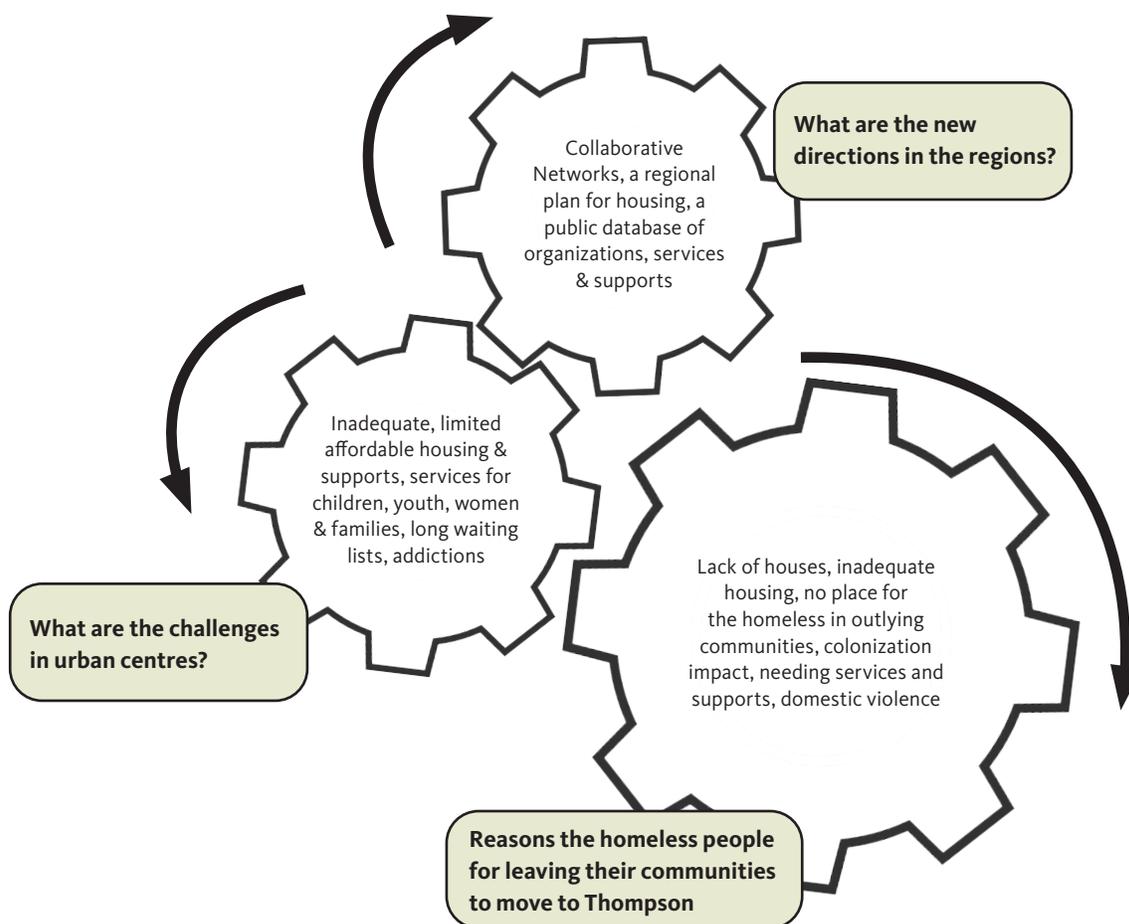
This section presents a summary of the responses to our research questions including the reasons participants gave about migration (their own or others) from their communities, the factors they believed are enabling homelessness, as well as the challenges and possible solutions to prevent and end homelessness in Thompson and Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation. The interlocking findings are displayed in figure 11.

A key focus of this study was to explore the factors that are facilitating homelessness and restraining movement out of homelessness in urban communities in the north. From the research it is clear that housing shortages and conditions, where participants' homes were overcrowded and/or where they were subjected to unacceptable living conditions, were key factors in causing homelessness and migration to the city. As discussed in the literature review above, it is a commonly understood situation in First Na-

tions communities that so many are subjected to unreasonable housing conditions. Similar to Peters and Robillard (2009) findings, lone parents, single individuals, couples without children, youth, people returning home from education/employment, those with mental health and other disabilities, and elders all had severely limited housing options in the communities.

Movement to Thompson was also the result of limited supports and opportunities in many of the outlying communities in the region. There are few supports for education, employment, legal aid, mental health, addictions, domestic violence, and/or living with chronic health conditions. There were deficiencies in community resources for crisis response (domestic violence, sexual assault, mental health and fire) in outlying communities. In addition, once in the city, processes for accessing services were complex and not always culturally safe. People's vulnerabilities (trauma, addictions, mental health, and life skills) were bound up with barriers in systems and services that included confusing processes, long waiting lists to access programs and housing and discrimination in urban centers. These are big gaps individuals and families experience when they move to urban communities

FIGURE 11 Interlocking of Findings Thompsons & NCN



and in the end are a major contributing factor to homelessness.

Another significant factor in becoming and/or remained homelessness occurred when people encountered inadequate supports while they transitioned to the city. Those with vulnerabilities (e.g. mental health and substance use) and lacking resources (e.g. ID, financial and tenancy histories) were particularly susceptible to becoming or remaining homeless (M. M. Bonnycastle, Simkins, & Siddle, 2016). Confusing processes or not being aware of services or how to access services was a significant obstacle and contributed to people giving up. This suggests there needs to be system wide responses to people's resettlement needs in urban centres. The idea of meeting people

where they are at and wherever they access help will likely be essential, as well as taking the time to ensure people are aware of the resources that are available, to prevent and end homelessness.

Some of the participants experienced housing instability and homelessness early in their lives when they were children or adolescents. Besides being seen as traumatic effects of colonial history, this was connected with the deficiencies in services for children, youth, women, families and other groups. These early encounters with housing instability and homelessness and poor service responses created a cumulative effect that has had consequences in their adult lives.

Many of the participants in this research or their loved ones were struggling with substance

use. Several participants with lived experience had early exposure to substance use. Substance use disorders are prevalent in homeless populations and it is widely understood harm reduction approaches for drug and alcohol users could minimize adverse health impacts on this population (Frankish, Hwang, & Quantz, 2005). Recent research suggests focused substance use treatment interventions for homeless and at-risk populations are necessary (McVicar, Moschion, & van Ours, 2015).

Kidd, Thistle, Beaulieu, Grady, and Gaetz (2018) in their study of youth recommend,

...having rural and urban education and labor training programs aimed at youth, investing in culturally specific shelters and substance use intervention services in urban and rural centers, investing in projects reconnecting youth with consanguineal family members and affinal kin, reconnecting youth with elders, and helping youth to understand historical processes of dispossession to explain generational traumas. These endeavors strengthen a sociocultural relationship web — Indigenous worldview known as ‘All My Relations’ that can catch youth before entrenched patterns of absolute homelessness occur in later life. (p. 169).

The Calgary based Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness likewise recognized the need for culturally relevant services and harm reduction approaches as key strategies to address Indigenous homelessness (Ramsperger & Ramage, 2017).

Many participants in interviews, focus groups and in the cafés talked of the importance of service providers listening to “the stories’ , meaning taking time to hear people’s experiences toward better understanding of their needs. It is well documented Indigenous people experience

multiple barriers in health and social care systems (Browne et al., 2011; Patrick, 2014; Tang & Browne, 2008). Czyzewski and Tester (2014) explain the deeper meaning that calls for ‘listening’ should have for helpers, particularly those who are non-Indigenous. It is not just about listening to the individual’s story; it is about ensuring the helper is authentic and there is genuine understanding of the person and their history before support is offered. “Of considerable importance is appreciating how processes, policies, and personal imposed on others are resisted. It also means recognizing the role that non-Indigenous people have in these stories” (Czyzewski and Tester, 2014, p. 214). This idea of commitment to reciprocal relationships was echoed in the thoughts shared by participants in cafés and focus groups for changing our ideas as a necessary precondition to get to the roots of what is needed. This will require avoiding subjecting people to strategies before their needs and wishes are fully understood.

Participants shared histories and experiences of colonization that have impacted their lives in different ways, for example their experiences of barriers to accessing housing and experiences of trauma, mental health, lack of a stable home, loss of the connections with their family and culture and a variety of causes affecting their well-being. Participants also talked regularly of their relationships with family, which often included other homeless people; that is people they call ‘family’. A few mentioned ‘good life’ alongside discussion about their connection with others, the land and how the reconnection with their land and culture would inspire them to reconstruct their lives. Going forward it will be important to recognize the potential in the strengths of these relationships and connections to prevent and end homelessness in the region.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This research confirms the need to listen to participants' voices to advance in the decolonization of housing programs and approaches to eliminate and prevent homelessness in the northern region of Manitoba. Getting to the root causes of homelessness and housing issues will require giving consideration to all the complex factors that are involved. This research provided the opportunity for participants to share their life experience. The use of the visual stories on the Bristol boards facilitated generative conversations, where participants had a space for understanding and surfacing the seeming imperceptible structural factors that contribute to homelessness (e.g., racism). The strengths and capacity of the people to maintain connections to community, land and culture were visible throughout the research.

Participants commented in different ways how they have been stigmatized, abused, secluded from services and access to different public spaces such as shopping malls. Participants perceived racism whenever they accessed health and mental health services, transportation, housing, shelters, rental and other public services. Racism is a key systemic barrier to ending homelessness and must be addressed. Change must include eliminating discriminatory policies that are cre-

ating barriers for Indigenous people who are homeless, women, children, youth and families. Services in urban centres need to be able to engage in meaningful reciprocal relationships with Indigenous people. Policies in services should ensure all involved in the provision of services to Indigenous people have understanding of the history of colonization and the cultural needs of Indigenous people. All service providers must also have the knowledge and skills to help (trauma and harm reduction approaches to addictions) and there should also be accessible specialized services available to treat trauma. In addition, strengthening the provision, quality and opportunity of services and supports at the community level is an essential strategy that we recommend to prevent homelessness.

Poor housing conditions, the lack of housing and affordability issues, have all been caused by structural neglect and are a significant contributing factor to the social conditions in communities in the region.

The backlog of housing issues in communities must be addressed. Housing must be built in First Nations communities that responds to their cultural perspectives and range of housing needs. More affordable housing, that is cultur-

ally relevant, must be built in Thompson and other non-Indigenous communities in the region. Programs should be established to meet housing needs including emergency housing for those with no place to go in Indigenous communities, as well as supports for accessing housing and programs for purchasing and maintaining their homes. There should be a means for prioritizing people for existing housing. People need to be able to access help when they are transitioning into urban communities. Information about housing, and services and supports should be visible to all in each community. It will also be important to create mechanisms to promote more collaborative work, such as by establishing networks and a regional plan and a strategy for housing. This work should include developing a database of organizations, services, programs and resources in the region.

More awareness of the history and impact of colonization is needed. Going forward, part of the process of increasing awareness should include programs that are developed to highlight the strengths and diversity of the Indigenous communities in the region. This must contain more resources to enable Indigenous organizations to offer cultural and land-based programming. There should be increased opportunities for cultural exchange including some cultural programs and land-based activities for people who are homeless, youth and families and some of these should be linked with Thompson. As above, it will be important to ensure the plans that are made for housing, services and supports and increasing awareness are representative of genuine reciprocal relationships and understanding, and thus are a good fit for everyone in the northern region to promote the dignity of homeless people and support their 'good life'.

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# Appendix A: The 12 Dimensions of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada

- 1. Historic displacement homelessness:** Indigenous communities and Nations made historically homeless after being displaced (p. 10).
- 2. Contemporary Geographic Separation Homelessness:** Indigenous individual's or community's separation from Indigenous lands, after colonial control. (p. 10)
- 3. Spiritual Disconnection Homelessness:** Indigenous worldviews or connection to the Creator or equivalent deity (p. 10)
- 4. Mental Disruption and Imbalance:** 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 (p. 10).
- 5. 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" (p. 11).
- 6. 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 (p. 11).
- 7. 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 (p. 11).
- 8. 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 (p. 11).
- 9. Nowhere to Go Homelessness:** A complete lack of access to stable shelter, housing, accommodation, shelter services or relationships; literally having nowhere to go (p. 11).
- 10. 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 (p. 12).

**11. 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 (p. 12).

**12. 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 (p. 12).







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