chapter

6

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

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Introduction

In many countries, Indigenous peoples are overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness. It is important to understand both why this is the case and what can potentially be done to prevent and respond to this phenomenon. It is also important to acknowledge that, in the face of adversity, Indigenous communities demonstrate remarkable resilience and cultural strength, including with respect to the complex issue of homelessness. To fully understand the challenges faced by Indigenous individuals and families, it is essential to celebrate the unique strengths and resilience that exist within their respective communities.

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While the focus of the present book is homelessness in wealthy countries where English is the dominant language, this chapter draws extensively on comparative research done on Australia, Canada and New Zealand, where a considerable amount of research has been done on homelessness among Indigenous peoples—by contrast, very little research on Indigenous homelessness has been done in either the United Kingdom or the United States.

This chapter will briefly discuss historical factors related to Indigenous peoples. It will then consider present-day social context, relating it to factors known to cause homelessness. Promising practices in the homeless-serving sector will then be discussed.

Historical factors

Since European contact, Indigenous peoples in Australia, Canada and New Zealand have experienced: colonization; the dispossession of land, water and other natural resources; forced relocation; and the loss of family connections and culture.

They have also experienced a considerable amount of trauma, including intergenerational trauma—which is trauma passed down from one generation to another. In reference to the impact of residential schools, Hodgson writes:

> *If you subject one generation to that kind of parenting and they become adults and have children; those children become subjected to that treatment and then you subject a third generation to a residential school system the same as the first two generations. You have a whole society affected by isolation, loneliness, sadness, anger, hopelessness and pain.*[1]

According to Anderson and Collins, such actions related to colonialism include *"assimilation and control."* Discussing Australia, Canada and New Zealand, they further argue: *"Outcomes relevant to homelessness include disempowerment, cultural erosion, social deprivation, loss of social and psychological well-being, and diminished political power and collective rights."*[2] The same authors note that all three countries

> *share a legacy of British colonization, and with it the systematic alienation of land from Indigenous peoples via acts of law, trade and violence...[C]ommon experiences of displacement and the associated collapse of traditional methods of productive capacity have left Indigenous peoples in these countries relatively disempowered, and more likely to experience deprivation than members of other ethnic groups...*[3]

Abele adds:

> *Pretty well all nation-states have something to apologize for. In the case of Australian, Canadian, Danish, New Zealander and Norwegian relations with their indigenous peoples, the wrongs have to do with unlawful expropriation of land and threats to ethnic survival or cultural continuity. In all five cases, the state directed these oppressive actions...A prime political objective of indigenous peoples' organizations has been the retrieval of frequently suppressed memories of oppression,*

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1 This quote has been taken directly from a 25 March 2020 article in the *Canadian Encyclopedia* by Peter Menzies titled "Intergenerational Trauma and Residential Schools:" https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/intergenerational-trauma-and-residential-schools
2 Anderson, J. T., & Collins, D. (2014). Prevalence and causes of urban homelessness among Indigenous peoples: a three-country scoping review. *Housing Studies, 29*(7), 959-976.
3 Anderson, J. T., & Collins, D. (2014). Prevalence and causes of urban homelessness among Indigenous peoples: a three-country scoping review. *Housing Studies, 29*(7), 959-976.

> *appropriation and misdeeds through and with an official acknowledgement of the wrongs that were done combined with a formal apology and some form of compensation.*[4]

Present-day social context

Indigenous peoples are consistently over-represented within urban homeless populations, often by a factor of 5 or more.

In reference to urban homelessness among Indigenous peoples in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Anderson and Collins note that *"Indigenous peoples are consistently over-represented within urban homeless populations, often by a factor of 5 or more."*[5] The same authors are quick to note that Indigenous peoples in these countries do not constitute one homogenous group—indeed, they have the following *"distinct Indigenous minorities: the First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples of Canada; the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia; and the Maori of New Zealand."*[6] It is also worth noting that there is important diversity within each of those distinctions.

In reference to Australia, Canada and New Zealand, Anderson and Collins discuss *"the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples among the incarcerated populations in the three countries…"* while stating that

> *"[i]mprisonment is itself a risk factor for homelessness, in that release is generally accompanied by economic hardship, often made more problematic by severed social ties and cultural connections. Imprisonment can also diminish life skills, while a prison record reduces opportunities for employment."*[7]

Anderson and Collins further note:

> *The removal of Indigenous children from their homes and families by government agencies is discussed in the literature for all three countries in terms of negative consequences for children and their parents, which can contribute to homelessness for either or both.*[8]

4 Abele, F. (2001). Small nations and democracy's prospects. *Inroads: A Journal of Opinion.*
5 Anderson, J. T., & Collins, D. (2014). Prevalence and causes of urban homelessness among indigenous peoples: a three-country scoping review. *Housing Studies, 29*(7), 959-976.
6 Anderson, J. T., & Collins, D. (2014). Prevalence and causes of urban homelessness among indigenous peoples: a three-country scoping review. *Housing Studies, 29*(7), 959-976.
7 Anderson, J. T., & Collins, D. (2014). Prevalence and causes of urban homelessness among indigenous peoples: a three-country scoping review. *Housing Studies, 29*(7), 959-976.
8 Anderson, J. T., & Collins, D. (2014). Prevalence and causes of urban homelessness among indigenous peoples: a three-country scoping review. *Housing Studies, 29*(7), 959-976.

Connecting the dots

Over time, it is not hard to comprehend how colonial actions discussed above could result in increased rates of homelessness. Indeed, all of these actions make it difficult for Indigenous peoples to afford housing on the private market. Many Indigenous communities have very little housing at all; and in some communities, regulations make it very challenging for households to secure mortgages.

It is also not surprising that such historical factors also predispose Indigenous peoples to high rates of individual-level risk factors for homelessness (e.g., having a history in foster care, having been unemployed, being a victim of violence, having often, etc.).

Put differently, when one: reflects on some of the major causes of homelessness discussed in Chapter 1 of this textbook; marries that with what has happened to Indigenous peoples—typically at the hands of European settlers over several centuries; and then considers present-day systemic racism, it is no mystery as to why Indigenous peoples often experience homelessness at much higher rates than non-Indigenous people.

Promising practices

In light of the many challenges experienced by Indigenous peoples with respect to homelessness, it is important to work towards improving outcomes—however they may be defined. What follow are some examples.

Funding injections. In many countries, social services for Indigenous peoples are severely underfunded—yet, important funding injections could help to both prevent and respond to homelessness among Indigenous peoples. This includes funding for education, employment, healthcare, early childhood development (e.g., daycare), income assistance, housing (including appropriate wraparound supports), eviction prevention initiatives, emergency facilities, and homeless outreach services. Such funding enhancements are desperately needed in both urban and rural settings.

On-site cultural programming. Whether you operate an emergency shelter, a daytime drop-in service, or housing, it can be beneficial to offer culturally relevant services onsite on a regular basis. Such programming might include music, arts and crafts, language support, and food-related support that might be relevant to local Indigenous populations. In Canada, it may involve smudge. Such activities should be led by Indigenous people with support from Elders.

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Access to Elders. Given the importance of Elders in many Indigenous cultures, many organizations in the homeless-serving sector should consider hiring the services of Elders. This may involve using a rotation of Elders, keeping in mind the diversity of Indigenous peoples in any given municipality. Different Elders specialize in different teachings, have different skill sets and have different understandings of various issues. These differences must be borne in mind when trying to find the appropriate Elder for each occasion. It may also involve having Elders 'on call' for residents who want to seek guidance outside of organized events. It is extremely important to provide appropriate compensation to Elders, in line with local expectations.

Staff training. While insufficient in and of itself, regularly occurring staff training on Indigenous awareness is very important. The training should be led by Indigenous people, ideally from the local community. It can sometimes come in the form of all-day trainings for all staff, and should occur at least once per year. Staff should also be encouraged to seek Indigenous cultural awareness training outside of such trainings—e.g., at local universities and colleges.

Guest presentations. While full-day trainings can be very meaningful, guest presentations on Indigenous matters can be shorter and more frequent (indeed, such presentations can have a duration of one hour or less). They can be made by Elders, knowledge keepers, Indigenous-focused service providers, and university-based Indigenous researchers. Presentations can be directed at staff, board members or program participants (i.e., clients). One possibility is to have lunch-time presentations for staff in 9-5 work settings; another is to have an evening speaker series at an emergency facility or apartment building. Presenters should be offered an honorarium and have their expenses covered.

Indigenous staffing. In order to properly serve a vulnerable population, it is important that staff understand the population in question, including their history and ongoing challenges (sometimes this may mean being able to speak a specific language). It is sensible to strive to have staffing numbers comparable to those of the population served—i.e., if 25% of clients are Indigenous, an organization might strive to have 25% of their staff also be Indigenous (by having too few Indigenous staff, those Indigenous staff who are hired may quickly become overwhelmed and burn out). This may require recruiting Indigenous personnel from outside the homeless-serving sector and then providing training related to homelessness. It may also require modifying the organization's expectations related to formal education (e.g., waiving the requirement of

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a master's degree for some positions). Similarly, homeless-serving organizations should strive to have Indigenous representation on their boards of directors and staff leadership (i.e., management) teams, ideally in line with the proportion of their clients that are Indigenous.

Indigenous peoples/communities should be involved in the development of any evaluation framework—or at least the portions focused on Indigenous peoples / communities.

Partnerships with Indigenous-focused organizations. Many non-profit organizations may have few if any Indigenous staff; yet, they may wish to offer culturally appropriate services to Indigenous peoples. One way to accomplish this goal is to reach out to local organizations that do have such institutional capacity. For example, an organization (let's call it Agency A) might reach out to an organization with strong capacity for Indigenous-specific support (Agency B). Agency A might pay Agency B to offer Indigenous-focused services at Agency A. Alternatively, Agency A might also hire services from private consultants specializing in culturally appropriate services for Indigenous peoples.

Ongoing evaluation and oversight. Organizations serious about improving services for Indigenous peoples should endeavour to hold themselves accountable. Accountability mechanisms may include an evaluation framework with Indigenous-specific inputs, outputs and outcomes. It might also include an annual survey specifically for Indigenous clients. Evaluation practices should incorporate oral traditions. Indigenous peoples/communities should be involved in the development of any evaluation framework—or at least the portions focused on Indigenous peoples/communities. That way, they can advise on what is meaningful, how best to phrase questions, how to approach data collection, and how to share evaluation findings.

Conclusion

In Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, Indigenous peoples have had natural resources taken from them on a large scale, been forced to relocate, lost family connections and culture, and experienced considerable trauma. All of these factors create present-day challenges that make it hard for Indigenous peoples to both access and maintain housing, making Indigenous peoples more vulnerable to homelessness. Promising practices in the homeless-serving sector include on-site cultural programming, access to Elders, Indigenous staffing, partnerships with Indigenous-focused organizations, and ongoing oversight and evaluation. All of this needs to be supported by substantial funding injections.

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Further reading

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About the author

Nick Falvo is a research consultant based in Calgary, Canada. He has a PhD in Public Policy and is Editor-in-Chief, North America, of the *International Journal on Homelessness*. He has academic affiliation at both Carleton University and Case Western Reserve University. Prior to pursuing his PhD, he spent 10 years doing front-line work directly with persons experiencing homelessness.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the following individuals for assistance with this chapter: Frances Abele, Daniel Béland, Jodi Bruhn, Doug Chaudron, Shelby Corley, Susan Falvo, Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Richard Horvath, Emma MacIsaac, Peter MacKie, Heather Morley, Jenny Morrow, Shaylene Scarett, Joel Sinclair, and two reviewers whose identity is being protected. Any errors are the responsibility of the author.

About this project

This is Chapter 6 of a sole-authored, open access interdisciplinary textbook intended to provide an introduction to homelessness for students, service providers, researchers and advocates. Focusing on the English-speaking countries of the OECD, it will discuss causes, solutions, challenges, successes, and innovations in the sector. It will serve as 'launching pad' for people new to the sector, as well as a refresher for experienced practitioners.

In addition to being open access, this book is different from other books in two key ways: 1) by focusing on all English-speaking countries of the OECD; and 2) by providing an overview of recent innovations in the sector—i.e., what's new, and what's working well?—making it useful to practitioners.

- The book's **intent** is primarily to serve as the main textbook for a university course designed for senior-level undergraduate as well as graduate students. It also serves as a resource for senior leadership in the homelessness sector.
- Book's **main themes**: contributing factors to homelessness; health conditions and health care challenges of persons experiencing homelessness; the unique needs of various subpopulations; staffing challenges in the sector; an in-depth examination of innovative practices; and solutions to homelessness.
- Book **objectives**: assist readers in understanding the fundamentals of homelessness; introduce them to both successes and ongoing challenges in the sector; and leave them feeling better-informed, able to make critical assessments, confident and empowered to take action within their own respective spheres of influence.

Table of contents (anticipated)

Target audience

- The book is intended primarily for course use, its primary audience being senior undergraduate students, graduate students and course instructors in English-speaking countries of the OECD. It can also be useful to senior leadership in the homelessness sector (e.g., board members, CEOs and staff).
- The book is intended for courses where homelessness is either the only focus or a major focus. For example, a course on housing and homelessness could benefit from this book. Standalone chapters could also be of great value in various disciplines.
- Some of these courses might be taught outside of the university setting—for example, by the UK-based Chartered Institute of Housing and by its counterparts in other countries, such as CIH Canada.
- The book can be used as either a primary or supplementary text.
- The book is intended to have international appeal, focusing on the English-speaking countries of the OECD: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
- Homelessness is widely researched and quickly evolving, as new approaches to both prevention and response are being developed. Much of the book's content will therefore be new even to experienced researchers and practitioners.

All material for this book is available free of charge at https://nickfalvo.com/. Newly-completed chapters will be uploaded throughout the year. The author can be reached at falvo.nicholas@gmail.com.