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Aboriginal Homelessness: A Framework for Best Practice in the Context of Structural Violence

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Abstract

Homelessness among Indigenous peoples is an important issue in Canada and internationally. Research was conducted in seven metropolitan areas in the four western provinces of Canada to explore current services with the aim of developing a best practices framework to end homelessness for Aboriginal peoples. Sequential mixed methods were used. Key results found agreement that Aboriginal peoples were overrepresented among the homeless and policy determined the approach to and comprehensiveness of services provided. Funding, lack of time, and lack of resources were highlighted as issues. Gaps identified included a lack of partnership, cross-cultural collaboration, cultural safety, and evaluation and research in service provision. Best practices included ensuring cultural safety, fostering partnerships among agencies, implementing Aboriginal governance, ensuring adequate and sustainable funding, equitable employment of Aboriginal staff, incorporating cultural reconnection, and undertaking research and evaluation to guide policy and practices related to homelessness among Aboriginal peoples.

Keywords

Aboriginal, best practices, homelessness, mixed methods, Western Canada

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Aboriginal Homelessness: A Framework for Best Practice in the Context of Structural Violence

Homelessness for Aboriginal peoples is a serious issue in many urban centres in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. Despite the significance of this issue, the needs of homeless Aboriginal peoples are often overlooked in research and in policies. This study focused on seven metropolitan areas in four western provinces in Canada and included four phases, with the goal of developing a best practices framework to work towards ending Aboriginal homelessness. This article provides a description of the study's methods, its key results, and an explanation of the best practices framework derived from the study, with a final discussion of the study's implications for policy and practice.

Background

As mentioned above, Aboriginal homelessness is a major and pressing issue in large urban centres in Canada (Belanger, Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2011; Chopin & Wormith, 2008; Hanselmann, 2001; Hwang, 2001), Australia (Memmott & Chambers, 2012), New Zealand (Collins, 2010), and the United States (Whitbeck, Devan, & Hartshorn, 2012). Aboriginal homelessness is particularly relevant in Western Canada. Aboriginal peoples represent only 4% of Canada's population and about 6 out of 10 live in the four western Canadian provinces—British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (Statistics Canada, 2013). In these provinces, Aboriginal peoples make up between 35% and 60% of the homeless population in Western cities (Belanger et al., 2012).

Urban Aboriginal homelessness occurs in the context of what is referred to as structural violence, which is “built into the [social] structure and shows up as deeply unequal life chances” (Dominguez & Menjivar, 2014, p. 186; see also Thurston & Montesanti, 2015) and structural racism, whereby it is the “economic, social and political institutions and processes of a society that create and reinforce racial discrimination” (Loppie, Reading & deLeeuw, 2014, p. 4). First Nations communities in the western provinces, for instance, are socio-economically disadvantaged, possessing the lowest Community Well-being Index¹ scores compared to those in other provinces (Strategic Research Directorate, 2015). As with the rest of Canada, Indigenous peoples' mobility from reserves to cities in Western Canada has been high and has contributed to increasing homelessness rates; yet, little is known about urban Aboriginal peoples (Environics Institute, 2010).

We do know that Aboriginal peoples' experiences of homelessness are rooted in historic and systemic factors that differ on a population level from those of the settler population (Patrick, 2014). Structural violence imposed by reserve systems, residential schooling, and the state's broader project of cultural genocide has increased Aboriginal peoples' risk of becoming homeless and experiencing other health and social challenges (Distasio, Sylvestre, & Mulligan, 2005; Jim Ward Associates, 2008; Menzies, 2006); this occurs through several intersecting factors, such as multigenerational trauma, addictions, interpersonal violence, poverty, and the lack of educational and employment resources on reserves. Intergenerational trauma in particular is a major factor complicating healing and recovery processes (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Sotero, 2006; Williams, 2015). Despite the extent of social

¹ The Community Well-Being Index is a measure of community socio-economic well-being based on indicators related to education, labour force participation, income, and housing.

and health problems faced by Aboriginal peoples, however, they have created and maintained strong social identities, advocacy roles, and governance institutions, while the “gaze” of settler researchers has often remained on their deficits (Kirmayer, Tait, & Simpson, 2009).

Furthermore, jurisdictional issues and policies not only impact Aboriginal peoples’ abilities to obtain services related to homelessness, but also their abilities to access other social and health services. Health and social services for Aboriginal peoples with Treaty Status are the responsibility of Canada’s federal government; yet, provinces or municipalities normally provide these services in all off-reserve jurisdictions. On the other hand, Aboriginal peoples without Registered Indian Status, including Métis, Inuit, and non-Status First Nations) do not necessarily receive coverage for certain services, such as access to funding for post-secondary education and uninsured health benefits, for which Treaty Status is required.

In the context of addressing structural violence, it is clear that Aboriginal peoples have different needs for service delivery than non-Aboriginal peoples living in Canada, but this has often been overlooked by research and policy (Bird et al., 2010; Thurston, Soo, & Turner, 2013), which, in turn, creates another experience of structural violence. Given the expressed desire to end homelessness, Aboriginal needs must be addressed; however, in order for such efforts to succeed, the development of services to meet the needs of Aboriginal peoples must recognize structural violence, and not unintentionally or blindly replicate inequities as has happened with other issues (see Tait, 2009).

Research Objectives

The aim of the study reported here was to ascertain which policies and practices were most effective in working with Aboriginal people who are homeless. We studied services in large Census Metropolitan Areas² in Western Canada, and identified the best practices and exemplary organizations in order to contribute to creating a best practices framework for planning culturally safe Aboriginal services in urban settings.

Conceptual Framework

This study and our overall program of research on Aboriginal homelessness is directed by a conceptual framework that incorporates a critical examination of inequities and recognizes that historical influences continue to be felt by Aboriginal peoples today. Health and social issues such as homelessness are often addressed through an individual focus as opposed to collective, population-based approaches to understanding health. Using an individual approach disregards structural violence and cultural safety. Cultural safety is defined as effective practice determined by the individual or family, while “unsafe cultural practice comprises any action which diminishes, demeans or disempowers the cultural identity and well-being of an individual,” (Nursing Council of New Zealand, 2005, p. 4). Furthermore, it is important to note that an aggregate of individuals also differs from a population, and exploring factors that describe both individuals and populations results in better definitions of problems and solutions (Rock, 2003). Homelessness, like illness and other social problems, is not determined by choice nor is it

² A CMA is an “area consisting of one or more neighbouring municipalities situated around a core. A census metropolitan area must have a total population of at least 100,000 of which 50,000 or more live in the core” (Statistics Canada, 2015, Part A—Short Definition, para. 1).

a lifestyle issue, but results from “power—or, more specifically, the various ways in which capacity develops and is exercised” (Rock, 2003, p. 133). Given the overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples within homeless populations, the negative impacts of having less power, being marginalized, and experiencing racism are evident for Aboriginal peoples as a group. As such, a collective focus on homelessness for Aboriginal peoples is necessary, as opposed to “treating one person at a time.”

We also recognize that services and programs arise from policy decisions or policy voids, and there currently exists a continuum of approaches to issues such screening for homelessness and the provision of affordable housing. Hence, the scope and availability of such services and programs in any jurisdiction will depend on the particular policy environment and the participants in policy development in that locale. When we refer to policy, we mean “a course of action or inaction chosen by public authorities to address a given problem or interrelated set of problems” (Pal, 2010, p. 2). In this respect, policies regulate and shape social, economic, and cultural components of our society and are implemented through instruments such as programs, services, regulations, and tax cuts (Pal, 2010). Policies, whether explicit or implicit, governmental or non-governmental, are generally considered proactive approaches to address issues; on the other hand, inaction or the absence of written policy is also a policy decision (Bacchi, 1999; Pal, 2010).

Methods

Design and Methods

A sequential mixed method design (J. Morse, 2010) was used to address this study’s research aims. The study was conducted over four phases and gathered both quantitative and qualitative data in order to understand the policy environments surrounding Aboriginal homelessness in Western Canada. The study was conducted in seven Census Metropolitan Areas in four provinces in Western Canada: Winnipeg in the province of Manitoba, Regina and Saskatoon in the province of Saskatchewan, Edmonton and Calgary in the province of Alberta, and Vancouver and Victoria in the province of British Columbia. In the context of this study, Vancouver included both the city of Vancouver and North Vancouver given the accessibility of services in these areas (as opposed to the Greater Vancouver area). The sample and data collection approaches for each research phase are outlined below in Table 1. Other aspects of the larger project have been reported elsewhere (see Thurston, Oelke, & Turner, 2013). For the purposes of this article, however, we will focus on the results that informed our understanding of best practices in Aboriginal homelessness and our recommendations for policy.

Ethics Approvals

Our study followed the Tri-Council guidelines for research with Aboriginal peoples (Government of Canada, 2015). We worked with an urban Aboriginal organization, the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary, to ensure that the study addressed the principles of community engagement, collaborative participation, and ownership. Throughout the project, we consulted with an Elder who held a sweat lodge ceremony for research team members at the beginning of the study. The Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary also reviewed and approved the study.

Table 1. Methods by Research Phase

| Method | Sample | Data collected | Data analysis | <i>n</i> |
|---|---|--|--|-------------------|
| Phase 1 | | | | |
| Development of a database of organizations • Internet searches • Review of publically available lists • Validation via email and phone | • Housing organizations for individuals with mental health concerns and/or disabilities, addiction and rehabilitation facilities, and safe homes or shelters for various populations including Aboriginal peoples • Organizations providing referrals and advocacy for housing or homelessness | • 29 data components (e.g., housing information, population served, organization size) • 2006 Statistics Canada data (Statistics Canada, 2010) • Contextual data from targeted websites (e.g., government, National Housing Research Committee) | • Descriptive statistics • Chi square | 129 organizations |
| Phase 2 | | | | |
| Seeking best practices • Semi-structured phone interviews | • Stratified and random sample of 20% of organizations from Phase 1 • Three categories: children and youth, seniors, and other populations | • Best practices for Aboriginal peoples in their organization • Governance, funding, sustainability, partnerships, cultural competence • Identified organizations in their city providing the best services for Aboriginal homeless with rationale | • Thematic analysis | 64 |

Results

Results have been organized around the framework that emerged from the study for best practices to address homelessness for Aboriginal peoples. Seven components for best practices were identified, and they are illustrated below in Figure 1. These components intersect; for instance, Aboriginal governance increases the likelihood of employing Aboriginal staff. If each service in a city addressed each component, a homelessness services sector that is effective for Aboriginal peoples could exist. Each component can be taken as an entry point into best practices, but on their own these components cannot transform a program, service, or sector.



Figure 1. Key components of the best practice framework.

Mandates among the exemplar cases differed, but all had a common theme insofar as they all provided care and advocacy for homeless individuals including Aboriginal homeless peoples. There was a focus therefore on the community well-being of the individuals served. These organizations were flexible enough to be able to respond to the often-changing needs of the homeless community, and more specifically to those of Aboriginal homeless peoples.

Engagement of the community of homeless peoples, and in this case Aboriginal peoples, and their participation in organizations was evident in exemplar cases. This occurred in a variety of ways, including:

- Seeking feedback from individuals who were receiving and had in the past received services at their organization through both formal and informal evaluation processes,
- Seeing input regarding service delivery and activities, and
- Having representatives on organizations' boards.

Furthermore, past clients and those who had previously been homeless were occasionally hired as staff or could volunteer as peer mentors. This high degree of engagement from participants increased the credibility of these organizations and the programs they offered to their clients, other organizations, and funders. Coupled with culturally safe practices, these organizations were considered to be highly respected and trusted by Aboriginal homeless individuals and by the Aboriginal community. As a result, their engagement meant they had "street cred" among Aboriginal peoples.

Cultural Safety

As a concept and framework, cultural safety was not well understood and was underutilized when delivering care for Aboriginal homeless peoples. Some participants talked about the value of cultural safety in homelessness programming; that is, they emphasized the importance of understanding the historical and cultural experiences of Aboriginal peoples to support healing relationships with individuals. Most non-Aboriginal organizations focused on superficial activities as symbols of their sensitivities (e.g., attendance at public events for Aboriginal peoples, crafts, and having an Elder come for weekly visits). Aboriginal peoples were often included under a multicultural, umbrella-like structure that included all ethno-cultural populations (meaning non-Caucasian). One participant remarked, for example:

I think it is with any visible minority too. We see a lot of Asian people here in our drop in center. We see a lot of people who are stigmatized in their cultures, especially because of mental illness, so it's a real focus for us to make sure that we are being culturally sensitive to people. (Phase 2, Participant 68)

Approximately one third of organizations (36%) did acknowledge the need for their staff to undergo cultural training, but it was not clear whether this training ever occurred, and whether it would focus on providing an in-depth knowledge of cultural safety and their own organizational cultures and the attendant impacts on practice.

Partnerships and Relationships

The need for partnerships was overall well supported by the organizations we interviewed due to both the scarcity of resources and the fact that most organizations were not able to provide all services for all of the types of clients entering their organization. Partnership was most often practiced through client referrals, to apply for funding, and, to a lesser extent, to create collective resources. The development of formal partnerships, however, was limited by the mandates of the organizations, the specialized services provided by the organizations, and the local governance structures within organizations. Even though partnership was identified as an important factor regarding organizations' success or lack thereof, most providers of services to the homeless operated in isolation and focused on specific demographics and social and health issues. Few participants from organizations could name other organizations with whom they partnered, for example. Given the complexity of homelessness, particularly for Aboriginal peoples, a greater degree of partnership between these organizations and others would be necessary to address the issue; thus, implying that the needs of Aboriginal homeless individuals were not well addressed.

Partnership was, however, the foundation for success among exemplar organizations interviewed in Phase 3 of the study. As one participant noted,

It all comes from years of working together and building those partnerships because getting that trust and the commitment and having co-operative partnerships, and of course we definitely need the funding from the government . . . It took years to do that and I think that's a big piece of why we're where we're at today. (Phase 3, Participant 61)

This participant identified partnership in a number of different forms, including participation in community committees and cooperation with specific organizations to serve the needs of their clients.

Cross-cultural collaborations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations and funders were evident but limited. A number of challenges were identified by participants regarding potential cross-cultural collaboration. Working across jurisdictions (e.g., First Nations reserves) made partnerships more difficult, for example, and a competitive funding environment often had a negative impact on the possibility of collaboration. Differences in language and cultural understandings were cited as common. Furthermore, lack of information of important issues (e.g., history and intergenerational trauma) and of Aboriginal cultural backgrounds (e.g., social and cultural norms, protocols, and expectations) were commonly identified by participants as barriers to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations working together. Finally, perceived and/or real racism impacted working together. One participant stated,

You know it's very difficult for Indian organizations to get proper partnerships in the city and I'm hoping that'll change. I kind of think it's due to the discrimination. (Phase 2, Participant 84)

Participants reported that the development of cross-cultural partnerships required a great deal of time and were most successful when the focus remained client-centred.

Nearly all of the staff (92%) from Calgary-based organizations in Phase 4 of the study revealed an interest in collaboration, and 61% felt they had the capacity to collaborate. Interest in collaboration arose either from a belief that, given the high numbers of Aboriginal peoples they were serving, it was the right thing to do, or from already having collaborative partnerships in place. Several of the informants

interviewed recognized the importance of providing Aboriginal-specific services, but felt that their organizational mandates restricted them in terms of their ability to offer such services. Many informants were interested in collaboration, but were cautious of their ability to participate given the demand that such an initiative would place on their organization's resources (including staffing and funding). As one interviewee expressed,

It would depend on the intensity of it [collaboration] (Phase 4, Organization 6).

Thus, while partnership and collaboration were identified as being important components of best practices in providing services for the homeless, participants stated that they were generally underfunded and understaffed and therefore had limited capacity to complete additional work, even though they considered it to be important.

Aboriginal Governance and Coordination

Overall in this study, there was a limited recognition of the need for Aboriginal leadership and governance in the area of homelessness and housing to ensure the needs of Aboriginal homeless individuals were being met. Furthermore, few people discussed the necessity of Aboriginal leadership for successful collaboration between organizations. Evident in exemplar cases, however, was the inclusion of Aboriginal peoples at all levels of the organization. Positions for Aboriginal people were included on boards and upper level management where they had an influence on leadership within the organization.

Adequate and Equitable Funding

Service and program funding was a major concern for organizations. Short term project funding—as opposed to longer term funding—for comprehensive services presented a variety of issues for organizations, making it difficult for organizations to provide continuity in terms of their services and staffing. With an increase in short term funding availability, organizations spent many hours writing grants as well as focusing on fundraising to bridge funding gaps. Specific, specialized funding for Aboriginal clients also posed problems. Funding criteria and mandates were not always well aligned. Organizations had to tailor their applications for funding to existing criteria, and ensure it was commensurate with their mandates and to the populations they already served. One participant said,

Now, over the last 10 years, [our] focus has shifted somewhat and a lot of it has to do with the funding that is available. (Phase 2, Participant 70)

Specialized funding was characterized by competition and conflicts between organizations. Funding was also very competitive due to funding caps, geographic distribution, and issue focused funding. Organizations vying for the same funds, for example, would not know from year to year where and to whom contracts would be awarded, or if there would even be enough funding to maintain their programs. Although these issues are not specific to organizations providing services to Aboriginal homeless peoples, they are particularly relevant given the high number of Aboriginal people who are homeless, the complexity of their needs, and the additional inequities they face (e.g., racism in seeking rental units).

Aboriginal Staff

Some of the people interviewed in Phase 2 prioritized hiring staff who self-identified as Aboriginal in order to reflect the population their organization served, believing this would better serve the needs of Aboriginal homeless individuals. One third of organizations interviewed described the valuable skills and knowledge that Aboriginal staff brought to their organizations. Most importantly, these individuals brought with them contacts and networks to address the needs of Aboriginal homeless people. For example, one participant described the contributions of an Aboriginal staff member by saying,

It makes a huge difference . . . for our clients . . . For example, our housekeeper, she would be just one of our many Aboriginal staff, but she's a really good example because even from that standpoint we'll often have women in our detox who are Aboriginal and I will see [the housekeeper] sitting down, you know, on a bed or whatever talking to an individual because they feel like they can connect with her even though she's not in a counselling capacity, she's also a support person. (Phase 2, Participant 137)

Even one Aboriginal staff person at an organization was often enough to increase the trust and comfort level of Aboriginal help seekers. Challenges were also discussed; in particular when non-Aboriginal staff or organizations assumed that a single Aboriginal person on staff would be able to accommodate all of the duties of offering Aboriginal cultural support within an organization. One participant described the situation by saying,

I know that that's a big concern in the community as well, you might have 300 workers at one shelter but why is there only one Aboriginal worker? They can't do all of it. (Phase 2, Participant 45)

Such beliefs and policies represent the level of tokenism and exploitation evident in some organizations based on participants' responses. Unfortunately, organizational policies regarding procuring Aboriginal funding were sometimes based on having at least one Aboriginal person on staff in an organization.

Cultural Reconnection

Most organizations surveyed in Phase 1 did not provide services specifically for Aboriginal homeless individuals despite the high numbers of Aboriginal people using their services. In Saskatoon and Winnipeg, approximately one third of organizations did provide cultural services for Aboriginal people, but the proportion was lower in other cities. Despite the high number of Aboriginal individuals served by homeless organizations, the results were similar for non-Aboriginal organizations interviewed in Phase 2— although cultural reconnection to promote well-being for Aboriginal peoples was an important component identified in Aboriginal organizations interviewed in Phase 2 of the study, as demonstrated by this participant:

Well it's part of the tool kit . . . I mean we have people on staff who are pipe carriers. We can call on a range of cultural resources that are outside the agency because . . . some of our staff have personal connections but as an organization, as a practice as an organization, it's something we very much encourage for those links to be developed because it's critical to the success in many cases to retaining housing. (Phase 2, Participant 131)

Building trust and peer mentoring were used by Aboriginal organizations to meet this need to promote and develop well-being amongst Aboriginal help seekers.

Cultural continuity was also a key component of effective organizations. All successful cases in Phase 3 had specific policies and activities in place to address the needs of Aboriginal peoples. They were sensitive to the challenges experienced by Aboriginal individuals who were homeless and the important healing that cultural connection could provide to them. This could include practices like regular access to Elders and access to activities (such as traditional craft classes) within the context of receiving broader support for their Aboriginal identities and for cultural safety. In this way, organizations avoided the potential tokenism that might accompany their efforts to offer these resources (instead of more in-depth efforts to be inclusive, for example). Aboriginal individuals working at all levels of an organization increased the comfort levels of Aboriginal clients and addressed their complex needs.

Research and Evaluation on Best Practices

Most organizations interviewed in Phase 2 of the study did not conduct evaluation of their services. Evaluation may be conducted when required by a funder for a specific project, although participants found the prescribed outcomes not particularly meaningful when it came to understanding the effectiveness of the services they provided. Most participants (74%) shared information about effective organizational policies and practice. When we sought clarification about these, they described specific individuals or programs as effective without providing a lot of specificity to their answers. For example, one participant said,

I'm not sure [what creates effectiveness], she's just got a good reputation, she keeps her buildings full and she's getting people off the street. (Phase 2, Participant 138)

Participants also noted that these evaluations required resources, like time, that were limited in most organizations. This was particularly relevant for Aboriginal organizations because they were often small and had even fewer resources. Formal follow-up with clients occurred very rarely. Some informants did suggest that improvement in the capacity to carry out evaluation was important to better understand the effectiveness of their services, but they had little access to research and other resources that could help them to design effective services for Aboriginal people who are homeless. Participants were particularly interested in obtaining information, and they welcomed guidance and support for the delivery of services for the homeless.

Discussion

By including seven cities, this study contributed to the comparative research called for by Collins (2010)³; however, because of this study's breadth there is no single policy environment to describe and thus no pan-Indigenous policy or program that can be implemented. Our framework calls for sensitivity to local contexts and local peoples. Public policy directly affecting Aboriginal peoples who live on

³ This comparative approach included the comparison of homeless counts across three urban centres (Vancouver and Edmonton [Canada], and Auckland [New Zealand]), analysis of homeless counts from the perspective of the public and as reflected in policy, and comparing commonalities and differences in policies from these urban centres (Collins, 2010).

reserves in Canada is solely the responsibility of federal governments, although the implementation of these policies is often shared with band councils and provincial governments (e.g., child welfare and health care). Aboriginal people who live in cities, which is about half of the population, are impacted by another jurisdiction: that of the municipal government. In fact, there is no uniform system of policy-making for urban Aboriginal peoples across Canada, even though the federal government introduced the Urban Aboriginal Strategy in 1998⁴(B. Morse, 2010). In light of this, our framework for best practices addresses common processes that have worked, rather than suggesting specific policy decisions that may or may not fit the context of a given urban setting.

As we have mentioned, cultural safety is important for all organizations and their staff in order to provide a foundation for respectful and appropriate services for Aboriginal homeless people. Cultural safety training is needed at all levels of organizations (e.g., all levels of leadership and service) to facilitate culturally safe care for Aboriginal peoples (Oelke, Thurston, & Arthur, 2013). Cultural safety training for all staff and board members will facilitate cultural safety in organizations. Similarly, assessing the cultural safety of settings where services are delivered also needs to be addressed (Oelke, 2010); participants discussed this when they referenced Aboriginal art and other visuals in facilities where services were offered. Reviewing organizational policies, practices, and the environment is an important first step in providing culturally safe services for Aboriginal homeless peoples. Other sectors (e.g., the health care sector) are also dealing with the issue of cultural safety, and collaborations may be encouraged in order to share resources and opportunities. Cultural safety training needs to start in professional schools, including universities and colleges, that educate future professionals who may one day work with those who are homeless. These institutions need to assess whether they are welcoming to Aboriginal peoples as students, as well as whether their curricula prepare graduates for non-racist, culturally safe service delivery.

Partnerships were identified in all phases of our study as a critical factor for creating collaborative structures and processes to address the varied needs of Aboriginal homeless individuals. Partnerships with Aboriginal organizations to facilitate both cultural safety and collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations were noted as being essential to the delivery of appropriate services. Resources to support collaboration in the form of funded personnel with allocated time are critical, as many organizations spoke of struggling with limited resources. Those involved in organizations need to consider whether referring Aboriginal clients to Aboriginal-specific services is an appropriate response to the issue of Aboriginal homelessness. Likewise, funders need to ask if there is sufficient support provided for leaders in cultural safety to enable them to provide mentoring and consultation to those services entertaining organizations' readjustment towards effecting greater cultural safety. In Canada, for instance, Friendship Centres are an urban resource that could be funded to provide consultation with non-Aboriginal services.

⁴ "The Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS) was developed in 1997 to respond to the needs of Aboriginal people living in key urban centres. Through the UAS, the Government of Canada provides flexible seed funding and seeks to partner with other levels of government, Aboriginal and community organizations, and the private sector to support initiatives that increase the economic participation of Aboriginal people living in urban centres" (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2014, para. 9).

Given the gross over representation of Aboriginal peoples among the homeless population and the desire for self-determination, Aboriginal leadership is essential. At the time of this study, the importance of Aboriginal leadership in organizations related to homelessness and housing was not recognized. Since there were so few programs governed by Aboriginal people, it was impossible to determine where they were most important. Aboriginal self-determination in both policy and strategic planning may help answer these questions about efficacy. Certainly, as the term implies, the “token” representation of Aboriginal peoples in governance and co-ordination was insufficient; however, no city included in our study was in a position to address what a balanced approach (e.g., representative numbers of Aboriginal decision-makers and staff working in the homeless sector, proportionate funding) would look like, given that up to 60% of the homeless population was Aboriginal individuals. Fear of losing control among non-Aboriginal people working in the sector may result in inadvertent racism and stereotyping, and working to prevent this potential backlash should be considered in future strategic plans.

Similarly, adequate funding for Aboriginal-specific services for the homeless could be considered equivalent to the proportion of the homeless population that self identifies as Aboriginal. The issue of equity in terms of funding distribution needs to be considered as we ask for time and resources to be put into relationship building, problem solving, and organizational and personal change. One-size-fits-all is not an equity model; rather, it avoids doing the hard work of defending the short- and long-term benefits of investing more money in one area or another.

Our research found that there were few Aboriginal staff members working with the homeless population in these seven cities. To ensure that greater numbers of qualified Aboriginal staff are working in this area, training opportunities—including cultural safety training—should be made accessible to Aboriginal individuals. A partnership with community colleges could expedite this approach insofar as community colleges and employers could work together to address a community’s vocational and educational needs (Orr, 2001). Staff ratios could thus be expected to reflect the number of Aboriginal people that are homeless; however, Aboriginal peoples have expressed that in a culturally safe service, this is less of an issue. Indeed, the notion of optimal representation among staff may change as systems change and become more culturally safe.

The inclusion of Aboriginal peoples in service delivery in part addresses the importance of cultural reconnection when addressing the needs of Aboriginal homeless peoples. It has to be recognized, though, that not all urban Aboriginal people have a connection to Aboriginal culture or know their own histories (Henderson, Ireland, & Thurston, 2015), so there may be a need for various forms of cultural healing. The specific local Aboriginal community in a given context or locale is best positioned to identify and address these needs. Our study found that the incorporation of cultural services with traditional Elders was a valuable addition to existing programming; Elders provided important connections to Indigenous knowledge and networks. Our research also found that an informal Aboriginal street network was often used to identify which services were culturally safe, and thus this network’s input would be invaluable in assessing the impact of future strategic plans.

Plans to end Aboriginal homelessness can benefit from research, especially evaluation, as the need for best practices across the continuum of prevention and services for Aboriginal peoples continues to develop. Opportunities need to be explored proactively. Partnerships between Aboriginal organizations and academic researchers, similar to those used in this study, must be developed and nurtured, and

Indigenous research methodologies embraced (Ball & Janyst, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Certainly, academics and community researchers also have a role to play in creating culturally safe environments.

Conclusion

This framework for developing best practices in homeless services for Aboriginal peoples provides a starting point for communities to begin a process that is, we believe, necessary if homelessness rates are to be reduced provincially, nationally, and internationally. The results of the study discussed here provide a baseline for seven cities in Western Canada, and could be replicated to assess how movement towards recognizing the needs of Aboriginal peoples has occurred. The barriers and challenges to delivering homeless services—particularly for Aboriginal peoples—identified by participants in this research can be addressed by governments and program funders. A desire and a commitment, a “political will,” to address these issues is required; national and international networks addressing homelessness must be assessed in terms of ending structural violence.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Canada (TRC) has described the work that needs to be done to bring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples together in order to solve problems such as homelessness (TRC, 2015). We hope that our arguments compel those in the homeless sector to take a stand and ask if they are perpetuating structural violence when it comes to their work with Aboriginal peoples. The TRC (2015) final report urged non-Aboriginals to “demonstrate real societal change,” be allies in “the revitalization of Aboriginal laws and traditions,” and to accept traditional Aboriginal knowledge including ways of resolving conflict (pp. 16-17).

At the same time, in conducting this study, we have stood back and want to acknowledge “the strength, compassion, courage, and humanity” used by people in the homeless serving sector to “endure or help make bearable the hard journey of others” (Kleinman, 2014, p. 120). There are no silver bullets for ending homelessness: neither at the individual level, nor at the level of community. As such, the struggle for solutions to this issue must remain dependent upon developing good relationships within and among communities, and embracing the essence of partnership, collaboration, and cultural safety.

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