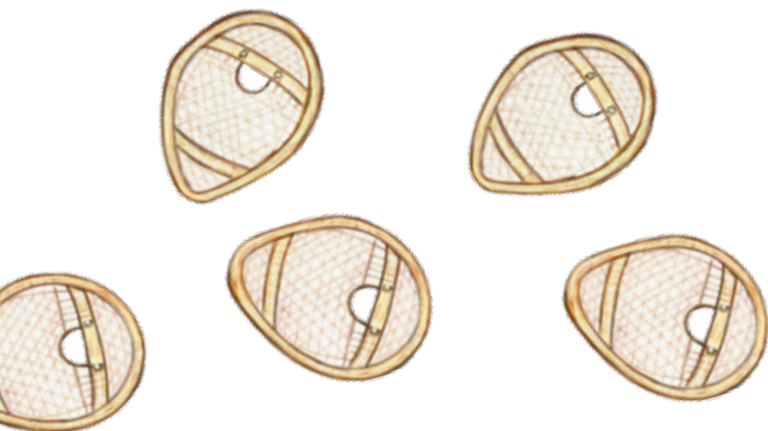


HOMELESSNESS IN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

New Insights to Guide Intervention



FIRST NATIONS OF QUEBEC
AND LABRADOR HEALTH
AND SOCIAL SERVICES
COMMISSION

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BACKGROUND

In November 2016, the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission (FNQLHSSC) published the *Portrait of Homelessness in First Nations Communities in Quebec*.¹ Based on a review of relevant literature and information collected from 13 communities, this portrait revealed the various types of homelessness present in the communities, the profile of the individuals at risk for each type, the principal factors related to individuals becoming or remaining homeless, and an estimate of the extent of the issue. The work sheds new light on the various types of homelessness present in First Nations communities.

This initial portrait highlights the need to continue developing knowledge of the trajectories of homeless individuals and to explore which services should be offered to them. These new insights will eventually allow us to provide better support to individuals who are in this situation.

In the fall of 2019, three discussion workshops were held during meetings with key figures from First Nations communities and organizations.² These workshops were attended by more than a hundred individuals with diverse knowledge and experience related to interventions with homeless individuals or those at risk of becoming homeless. The overarching question that guided the workshops was *What services are currently available and what new services should be made available to homeless individuals and those at risk of becoming homeless?* Three themes were discussed with the participants: visible homelessness, hidden homelessness, and at-risk individuals. The goal of these workshops was not to create an exhaustive inventory of the services currently offered and those that still need to be developed for each community, but rather to form an overall picture of the current situation from a collective standpoint. There also emerged from these discussions many interesting observations that contributed to a deeper understanding of the complex nature of homelessness in the communities.

This document presents key points from these workshops, supplemented by data from the 2019 First Nations Labour and Employment Development (FNLED) Survey and the 2015 First Nations Regional Health Survey (RHS), which offer a new perspective on homelessness.

1 http://www.cssspnql.com/docs/default-source/centre-de-documentation/portrait_itin_eng_web.pdf?sfvrsn=2

2 These workshops took place during several meetings: a meeting of the Health and Social Services Directors Network, a meeting of the communities adhering to the Income Security Framework Policy, and a First Nations housing and infrastructure mobilization meeting. It should be noted that some elected officials in the communities also participated in the workshops. Refer to the appendix for a full list of the communities and organizations represented at each of the workshops.

HOMELESSNESS IN THE COMMUNITIES: GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The issue of homelessness is closely intertwined with the housing crisis that many of the communities face. However, while the lack of housing is a problem, the lack of varying types of housing may represent an even greater one. The current housing stock is comprised mainly of ill-adapted housing, particularly for large families and single people.

However, homelessness in communities should not be regarded solely as a housing issue. It has its origins in a litany of past traumas, which now manifest in a diminished sense of well-being, stunted economic development, mental health problems, addiction problems, and disconnection from the land. Action is required to address all issues tied to homelessness so that the measures implemented have a real impact.

Various challenges have been reported and may complicate the process of providing homeless individuals with assistance. For one thing, many people in this situation do not regard their homelessness as an issue. They feel content and free and do not wish to change their lifestyle. Another issue is how remote the communities are, as this represents a considerable challenge in providing services. Moreover, there is very little coordination between the services offered within the community and those offered elsewhere. This applies both to Indigenous community organizations and the provincial health and social services network. This limits the continuum of services and impedes proper follow-up for homeless or at-risk individuals who move from “community to city,” “city to community,” or “community to community.” That said, certain agreements do exist, for example, between a community and a nearby homeless shelter. It is difficult to access funding for the implementation of services inside the community due to the eligibility criteria of certain programs and because the measures proposed by these programs frequently are not adapted to the reality of homelessness in the communities. Finally, there are not enough statistics to quantify visible and hidden homelessness in the communities, making it difficult to recognize the problem and plan services accordingly.

Presently, in the communities, the homeless receive assistance primarily through their social network, that is, their family, extended family, and friends. These caregivers need to receive better support so that they themselves do not experience difficulties (notably, financial ones) that may compromise their ability to assist their friend or family member. The strong sense of solidarity in these communities should be encouraged and supported, and the implementation of a formal support system should not undermine it.

In most communities, there is no distinction between the services offered to reduce poverty and those offered specifically to homeless or at-risk individuals. Moreover, there are no caseworkers directly responsible for overseeing the issue of homelessness. If someone were assigned this role, it would ensure that the homeless population was more carefully supported. It would also allow the development of a continuum of services, would raise awareness about homelessness among caseworkers and the population, and would generate and strengthen partnerships with organizations outside the community.

In order to effectively meet the many, complex needs of the homeless population and their friends and family, a multisectoral approach must be adopted. Various segments of the community need to work together to provide sufficient support. This includes sectors such as housing, health, social services, social development, education, public safety, and economic development. At the community level, creating a multisectoral action plan³ is a course of action that may be worth prioritizing over the short term as a means to open up communication, encourage coordination and collaboration between sectors, and develop a community-wide prevention network. There is also a willingness in communities to invest more time and effort into homelessness prevention, for example, by focusing on building the self-esteem of at-risk individuals and offering pre-employment programs to them.

3 The Comprehensive Community Planning (CCP) process currently underway in several communities across Quebec and Canada is an example of an initiative that aligns communities' various strategic and action plans and establishes a long-term vision based on effective engagement of the population and various sectors. For more information, visit: <https://fnqldsdi.ca/comprehensive-community-planning/>

FINDINGS, SERVICES AVAILABLE, AND SERVICES NOT YET DEVELOPED (BY TYPE OF HOMELESSNESS)

VISIBLE HOMELESSNESS

Visible homelessness (or rooflessness – without shelter) refers to people living on the street, in public spaces or in places not intended for human habitation.

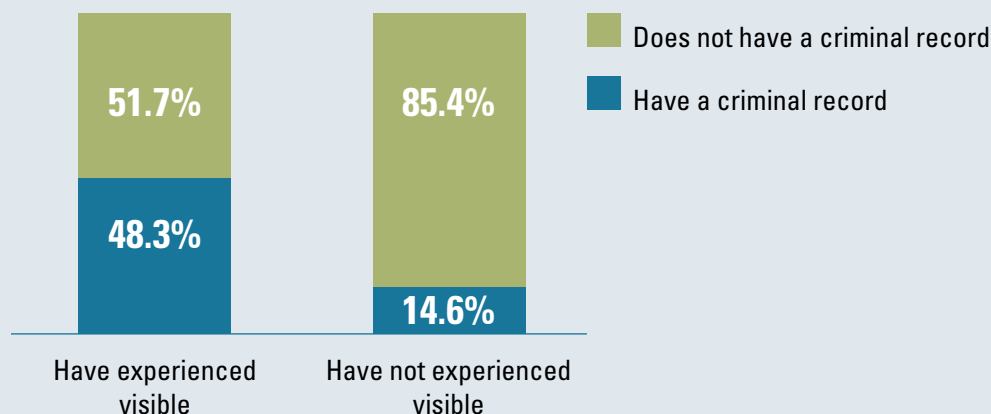
The visible homeless population is a group that can impose heavy demands on the resources that assist them, particularly health centres and nursing stations with limited staff. Many of these individuals seek services on a regular basis and are frequently struggling with multiple problems that community caseworkers have difficulty addressing. Conversely, certain individuals among the visible homeless do not use community services, and their needs are therefore not known to caseworkers.

Some data on visible homelessness

According to FNLED data, one in ten adults (9.9%) said that they had been visibly homeless in the past and living either in a shelter, on the street, or in an abandoned building. One third (36.9%) of these individuals lived in this condition for less than a month, and one third (34.8%) lived in this condition for more than a year.

There does not seem to be a correlation between visible homelessness and a person's gender, age, education, geographic remoteness, employment status, or perceived state of mental health. However, the results do show that among those who have experienced at least one situation of visible homelessness, a disproportionate number have a criminal record.

HAVING A CRIMINAL RECORD



Within communities, the visible homeless population has access to various services that allow them to meet most of their basic needs. These include food banks, clothing counters, as well as all front-line general services offered by health and social service centres and nursing stations. The following table presents a (non-exhaustive) overview of services frequently available, services available in certain communities, and services that have not yet been developed to assist with visible homelessness:

VISIBLE HOMELESSNESS		
Services available in MOST communities	Services available in CERTAIN communities	Services NOT YET DEVELOPED in most communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General front-line health and social services • Food baskets, food banks, collective kitchens • Clothing counter • Transportation to services outside the community • Assistance in obtaining identity cards, such as the health insurance card • Low-cost housing • Assistance in finding housing or employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to bathrooms, showers, and laundry rooms • Temporary housing • Use of a community-owned campground • Street outreach • Supervised residences • Maintaining a link with the homeless who move to the city • Referrals to services outside the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporary and transitional accommodation with various services provided by on-site staff • Warming centres (operating out of community halls, school gymnasiums, church basements, etc.) • Assistance in escaping isolation • Psychological support such as workshops on building self-esteem and developing social skills • Land-based activities and cultural activities • Outreach worker • Support for families and caregivers • Additional support for individuals with addictions, such as provision of clean needles and syringes • Hot meal service



HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS

Hidden homelessness refers to people living temporarily with friends, family, or strangers (couchsurfing) or living in unfit or extremely overcrowded housing.

The issue of hidden homeless and its potential impacts are not well known in the communities and as a result are often overlooked. It is therefore important to raise awareness about this matter among the population and caseworkers.

During the workshops attended by community representatives, certain observations stood out regarding hidden homelessness:

Couchsurfing:

- Since couchsurfing often represents an alternative to ending up on the street or being forced to leave the community, it is important to support families who help those in need and ensure that they suffer minimal negative consequences.
- It is difficult for caseworkers to offer support and services to individuals who couchsurf because they frequently move between residences.

Extreme overcrowding:

- “We are happy to be together and to be this many.” The problem is not the number of people living in a single residence, but rather the size of the residence. Offering a range of housing types is therefore a priority. Notably, constructing multi-unit residences allows extended families (multiple generations) to live under the same roof with each family in its own space. Additionally, constructing tiny houses designed for single persons and couples makes it possible to reserve bigger homes for larger families.

Unfit housing (requiring major renovations):

- It is possible for a community to obtain funding for home renovations. However, since it is often impossible to relocate families while the work is being done, due to a lack of available housing, the renovations frequently cannot go forward. This issue could be resolved by giving these families access to temporary housing.

Some data on hidden homelessness

According to the FNLED, more than one-third of adults (35.2%) have been forced to live temporarily with family, friends, in their vehicle, or elsewhere, because they had no other place to live. For a minority among them (21.2%), this situation lasted less than a month; for 36.5% of them, this state of hidden homelessness lasted over a year.

FNLED data also indicate that 8.8% of adults have experienced at least one situation of visible homeless in addition to a situation in which they received temporarily lodging from someone close to them.

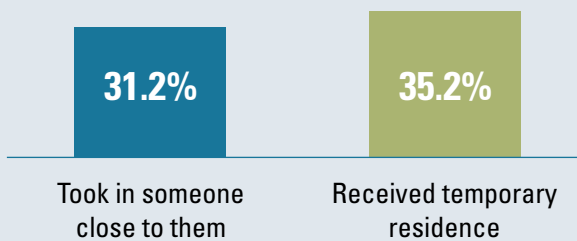
When asked whether they had provided temporary residence to someone close to them who had no other place to live, about one third of adults (31.2%) reported doing so at some time in the 12 months preceding the survey.

As for the issue of overcrowding in houses, over one in ten adults (14.0%) lives in an overcrowded residence.

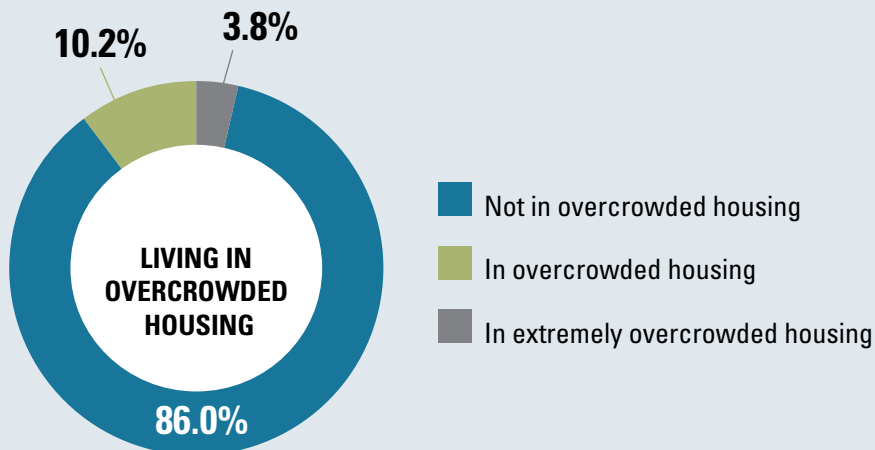
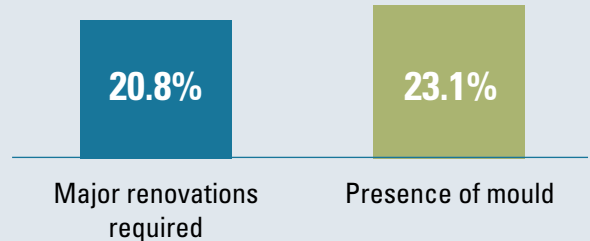
Among adults living with children, the rate of overcrowding is 20.5%. The percentage of overcrowded households is higher in communities in remote areas (18.7%) than communities in urban areas (7.0%). Similar results were obtained in 2015 by the First Nations Regional Health Survey (RHS).

As for the third type of hidden homeless, unfit housing, the 2015 RHS data indicate that one in five adults (20.8%) lives in a residence in need of major renovations and nearly one quarter (23.1%) discovered mould in their house in the preceding 12 months.

COUCHSURFING EXPERIENCE



UNFIT HOUSING



The following table presents an overview of the community services for the hidden homeless, organized into the categories of services available in most communities, services available in certain communities, and services that have not yet been developed:

HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS Same services as for visible homelessness, as well as the following:		
Services available in MOST communities	Services available in CERTAIN communities	Services NOT YET DEVELOPED in most communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority position on the waiting list for community housing (criteria varies between communities: families in overcrowded households, individuals with unfit housing, single people, etc.) • Housing renovations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis beds • Day centre • Outreach worker • Tiny house initiative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporary accommodation during renovations (prospector tent, trailer, etc.) • Diversified housing stock (for example, constructing multi-unit residences, tiny houses, etc.) • Support for families and caregivers • Increased awareness among the population and caseworkers



AT-RISK INDIVIDUALS

Individuals at risk of homelessness are in a precarious situation due to certain constraints or events: people leaving an institution, people living in a shelter for victims of domestic abuse, eighteen-year-olds who have come out of the youth protection system.

Community caseworkers do not systematically recognize the risk of homelessness associated with certain life circumstances (notably, when an individual has just left an institution, is living in a shelter for victims of domestic abuse, or has come out of the youth protection system). There are therefore no procedures or guidelines to inform interventions for at-risk individuals.

In the workshops held with community representatives, it was noted that, for such individuals, the gateway to receiving services is generally income assistance. At-risk individuals can be identified due to the fact that they often do not have a permanent address to provide. Many participants in the fall 2019 workshops also noted that people at risk of homelessness are often looked upon as potential “couchsurfers,” since this is frequently how they avoid ending up on the street.

It also seems that certain communities attract larger numbers of homeless due to where they are situated geographically and how near they are to institutions such as hospitals, treatment centres, and detention centres.

The following table presents an overview of the services for at-risk individuals currently offered in certain communities and the services that have not yet been developed:

AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS	
Same services as for visible and hidden homelessness, as well as the following:	
Services available in CERTAIN communities	Services NOT YET DEVELOPED in most communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land-based healing for individuals leaving an institution • Rooming house • Referral to the family • Support for capacity development • Social worker 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency, transitional, and long-term housing • Supervised residences • Priority position on the waiting list for community housing • Personalized assistance program (for example, a tour of existing services) • Prevention programs • Social reinsertion educator

CONCLUSION

Holding workshops with key figures in the communities has allowed us to provide an overview of the services currently available and the services that still need to be developed to support individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The workshops have also imparted knowledge that has led to a better understanding of this complex issue. Data from the FNLED and RHS confirm that a large segment of the population of these communities have experienced situations of visible or hidden homelessness.

During the workshops, it was repeatedly observed that there is a lack of services for this vulnerable population. Because of the strong values of mutual aid and solidarity present in these communities, homeless individuals are generally taken care of by their families and friends, which helps to ensure that their basic needs are met at least in part. These caregivers need to be better supported, and existing structures within the communities need to have the resources to meet the additional needs of this homeless population, thereby unburdening families. Another issue that was discussed is the lack of coordination with resources outside the communities, which prevents the development of an adequate multidisciplinary continuum of services for this highly mobile population.

Several potential solutions emerged from the workshops, and these warrant consideration. For example, it was suggested that a wider variety of housing be made available, specifically to meet the needs of people living alone, couples, and large families. In addition, it was recommended that communities provide services geared toward developing the social skills of individuals at risk of homelessness. However, implementing these solutions would require a substantial investment of time and money on the part of the communities as well as their partners.⁴ It is also important to stress the importance of cultural safety, especially in circumstances in which individuals are living outside of the community and in an environment where discrimination, racism, and judgemental attitudes are sometimes prevalent.

The current situation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic has confirmed once more how vulnerable First Nations communities are and how a situation of this kind can exacerbate the various problems the First Nation populations face, such as overcrowding in households and, in certain communities, a severe housing shortage. It is clearly more pressing than ever to find solutions to address the issue of homelessness in these communities.

In closing, when the potential consequences are considered and when the needs of the homeless and their families are addressed more effectively, the welfare of First Nations individuals, families, and communities will undoubtedly improve.

⁴ Refer to Appendix 2 for a non-exhaustive list of programs and initiatives that give First Nation communities access to funding.

APPENDIX 1 – LIST OF COMMUNITIES AND ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED IN THE WORKSHOPS

	Health and Social Services Directors Network	Meeting of the communities adhering to the Income Security Framework Policy	First Nations housing and infrastructure mobilization meeting
Barriere Lake			
Atikamekw Nation Council			
Mamit Innuat Tribal Council			
Mamuitun Tribal Council			
Ekuanitshit			
Essipit			
Gesgapegiag			
Gespeg			
Grand Conseil de la Nation Waban-Aki			
Kahnawake			
Kanesatake			
Kawawachikamach			
Kebaowek			
Kitcisakik			
Kitigan Zibi			
Lac-Simon			
Listuguj			
Manawan			
Mashteuiatsh			
Matimekush			
Mistissini			
Nutashkuan			
Odanak			
Opitciwan			
Pakua Shipu			
Pessamit			
Pikogan			
Timiskaming			
Uashat mak Mani-Utenam			
Unamen Shipu			
Waswanipi			
Wemotaci			
Wendake			
Winneway			



APPENDIX 2 – FUNDING PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES AVAILABLE TO COMMUNITIES

FEDERAL PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES

Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy Directives

Reaching Home is a community-based program aimed at preventing and reducing homelessness by providing direct support and funding to Designated Communities (urban centres), Indigenous communities, territorial communities, and rural and remote communities across Canada.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/homelessness/directives.html>

Rapid Housing Initiative

The Government of Canada, through Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), has launched the Rapid Housing Initiative (RHI). This \$1-billion program helps address the urgent housing needs of vulnerable Canadians, especially in the context of COVID-19, through the rapid construction of affordable housing.

<https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/nhs/rapid-housing-initiative>

National Housing Strategy

The National Housing Strategy has been designed as a toolkit. It features complementary initiatives working together to address challenges across the housing continuum and spectrum of housing needs. The strategy initiatives will:

- Build new affordable housing and renew the existing affordable housing stock
- Provide technical assistance, tools, and resources to build capacity in the community housing sector and provide funds to support local organizations
- Support research, capacity-building, excellence, and innovation in housing research

<https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/nhs>

CMHC Funding for First Nations

Seed Funding, First Nations Development Funding and On-Reserve Renovation Programs.

<https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/developing-and-renovating/funding-opportunities>

PROVINCIAL PROGRAM

Aboriginal Initiatives Fund (AIF) III

AIF III is made up of seven different components that are managed by the Minister Responsible for Indigenous Affairs. The goal of the AIF III is to support the economic, social, and community development of Indigenous people and to meet government requirements for consultation. Two components of the AIF III support projects connected to homelessness: Social Development and Community Infrastructures.

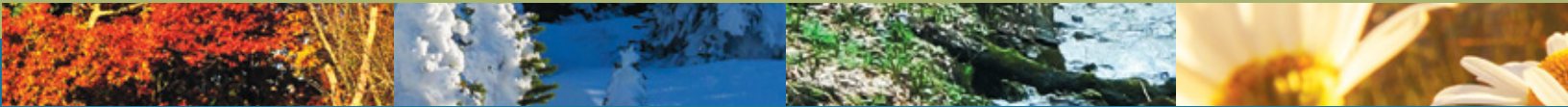
<https://www.autochtones.gouv.qc.ca/programmes-aide/fia3/index-en.asp>

VISION

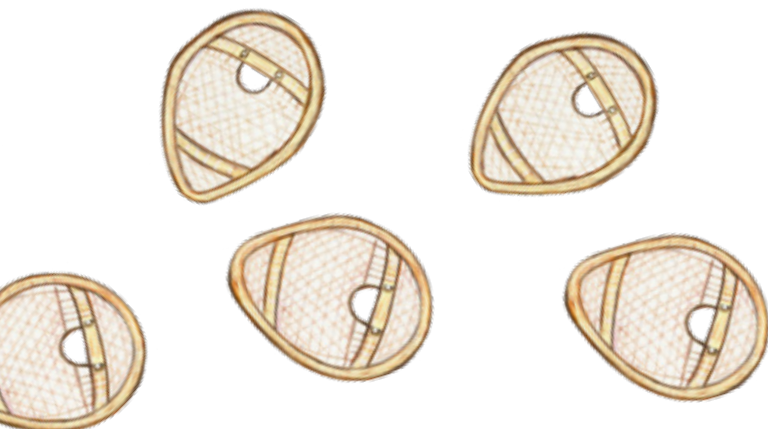
First Nations individuals, families and communities are healthy, have equitable access to quality care and services, and are self-determining and culturally empowered.

MISSION

To accompany Quebec First Nations in achieving their health, wellness, culture and self-determination goals.



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