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## Research-to-Practice Spotlight: Risk and protective factors of precarious housing among Indigenous people living in urban centres in Alberta, Canada

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### Background

Research has found that precarious housing (e.g., homelessness, couch-surfing, or doubling-up with other families), as well as precarious employment (e.g., temporary or part-time) are becoming increasingly common in Canada (Wellesley Institute, 2010; Vosko, 2006). These components of precarious living can have negative effects on society such as increased rates of crime and addiction, as well as psycho-social effects on individuals and families, including decreased self-esteem and self-worth (Bourgois, 2003; Ehrenreich, 2001; Iverson & Armstrong, 2006; Smith, 2005). For these reasons, it is important to address precarious living through targeted public policy and programs.

This study focused on the precarious housing of Indigenous people living in Alberta. Precarious housing can describe several different housing situations such as experiencing homelessness and living in emergency shelters, staying with family or friends because a person cannot afford their own housing, or living in sub-standard housing facilities. Access to adequate housing has social and psychological implications, as well as individual and public health consequences, having been identified as a social determinant of health (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004; Raphael, 2004).

In Canada, Indigenous people are over-represented among those experiencing homelessness and other forms of precarious housing. Previously identified risk factors for precarious housing include lower rates of employment and lower incomes than non-Indigenous



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populations, as well as the inability to afford housing, and instability caused by domestic migration (Fertig & Reingold, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2005).

Greater efforts of public policy and programming need to be made to address the over-representation of Indigenous people in precarious housing situations. To provide insight into the nature of protective and risk factors for precarious housing among Indigenous people, the following research question was asked: To what extent do demographic and socio-economic risk factors, along with personal health problems, predict housing situations for Indigenous people who are at risk of homelessness in Alberta?

Based on previous literature, the following hypotheses were made:

- A higher employment status (such as working full-time) will result in a lower likelihood of living in a precarious housing situation.
- Having a higher income will result in a lower likelihood of living in a precarious housing situation.
- Being married or living common law (as opposed to being single) will result in a lower likelihood of living in a precarious housing situation.
- Having children will result in a greater risk for living in a precarious housing situation.
- Lower levels of education will be associated with a greater likelihood of living in a precarious housing situation.
- Having a mental illness, addiction, or physical illness will result in a greater likelihood of living in a precarious housing situation.

#### Methods

Administrative data collected through the Alberta Seven Cities' Partnership on housing and homelessness were analyzed. The data were collected by 39 community-based non-profit housing support organizations in Calgary, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer. Demographic and outcome-related data were collected from consenting service recipients (n=4168) between March 2008 and April 2009 (Hoffart & Cairns, 2009). Service recipients were either experiencing homelessness or were at risk of experiencing homelessness and were seeking support to secure or maintain permanent stable housing.

Service recipients self-reported their housing situations which were categorized as either stable or precarious. Key variables were extracted related to demographic, socio-economic, and health-related information, including:

- employment status
- income
- educational attainment
- marital status
- dependent children
- mental health concerns
- physical health concerns
- addiction to drugs or alcohol
- gender



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- age
- size of city of residence

Descriptive analyses were conducted on the data for Indigenous respondents, and then logistic regression analyses were performed using a dichotomous dependent variable with the following two categories: 1) permanent, stable housing, and 2) precarious housing.

## Results

Out of the 4168 individuals in the administrative database, 1106 were Indigenous (27%). This included 422 males (38%) and 617 females (62%) with a mean age of 38.6 years (SD=12.5). The majority of Indigenous respondents were living in a precarious housing situation at the time of intake into the housing service organizations.

Based on the descriptive findings, it is apparent that the Indigenous people from the sample were experiencing several risk factors associated with negative housing situations, including the following:

- The majority of respondents were unemployed and had not completed high school education.
- The overwhelming majority had annual incomes of less than 15,000 dollars.
- The majority were not presently married or living common-law with a spouse.
- The majority had children under the age of 18 living with them.
- Almost half reported having a present addiction to drugs and/or alcohol.

The logistic regression analyses showed that the following variables were significantly associated with housing situation:

- size of city of residence
- income
- education
- marital status
- addiction to drugs or alcohol

All of the significantly associated variables except for addiction to drugs or alcohol appear to function as protective factors from precarious housing. The results suggest that living in a larger city, having higher income and educational attainment, and being married or living common law decreases the odds of living in a precarious housing situation. Having an addiction was found to be highly statistically significant in predicting whether or not an individual lived in a precarious housing situation. Based on these results, the odds of living in a precarious housing situation are increased by >3 times for those people that have a present addiction to drugs and/or alcohol.

## Discussion

This study extends the current knowledge about the varied socio-economic, demographic, and health-related factors that have been associated with urban Indigenous homelessness. However, because the study sample was drawn from people seeking services at housing support agencies in urban centres, the findings cannot be generalized more broadly. Nevertheless, these findings are based on analysis of a large sample of Indigenous people living precariously or at risk of living precariously. This analysis provides new insights about the effects of these predictor variables together on housing situations for Indigenous people, which addresses limitations of previous work on Indigenous homelessness.

These findings isolate four variables (income, education, marital status, and addictions) from those identified in previous research. It was also found that city size can be a contributing factor to precarious housing. Age and gender were not found to be statistically significant in these analyses.

## Implications

Based on these results, Indigenous people are at greater risk than non-Indigenous people in Alberta for living in precarious housing situations. Although Indigenous people comprise 4% of the population of Alberta, more than 25% of the sample were Indigenous. This over-representation is consistent with research on Indigenous homelessness in other cities (Baskin, 2007; Casavant, 1999; Distasio,

Sylvester, & Mulligan, 2005; Ruttan, LaBoucane-Benson, & Munro, 2008).

One way of addressing the precarious housing situations of Indigenous people living in Alberta could be to direct public policy and program attention to increasing educational attainment for Indigenous people. This could also serve to increase employment and income levels, which could have a positive effect on the over-representation of Indigenous people living in precarious housing situations in Alberta's seven cities.

A key finding of this research is the influence of having an addiction to drugs and/or alcohol on the housing situation of Indigenous respondents. Although we did not find a significant relationship between mental illness and precarious housing, addictions and mental health issues are often discussed together by homelessness researchers (Tsemberis, Gulcur, & Nakae, 2003). These findings suggest that people with addictions are at a greater risk for living in a precarious housing situation than those with mental health concerns. If there are higher rates of addictions among Indigenous people compared to non-Indigenous people, addictions could be a key reason why there is an over-representation of Indigenous people who are at risk of precarious housing.

Addictions treatment is an important health and social issue that needs to be addressed as a component of initiatives to improve housing situations for Indigenous people at risk of living in precarious housing situations. Public health policy and practice could therefore exert a more comprehensive approach to mental health treatment and support—including addictions treatment—to address negative housing outcome experiences for Indigenous people (Drake et al., 1998; Falvo, 2011). Further research should explore the root issues that lead to addictions among Indigenous people (Menzies, 2006).

It is important to note that precarious housing exists along a spectrum. It can include experiences of near homelessness, episodic homelessness, and chronic homelessness. In seeking to address this challenging social issue, greater efforts need to be made across this spectrum, including both efforts of prevention and intervention. The results from this study of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness in Alberta, Canada capture several factors that might contribute to the situation of individuals at various stages of this housing precariousness spectrum, with insights not only for intervention (such as through housing support models that aim to treat active addiction), but also for methods of prevention through targeted human capital development and urban migration support programs.

#### Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the efforts of the 7-Cities Committee on Housing and Homelessness and thank the Calgary Homeless Foundation. This research was funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

This research was published in the Canadian Review of Social Policy, and may be accessed [here](#) (subscription may be required).

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## Other Stories of Interest: Aboriginal Mental Health Report Series

National Collaborating Centre on Aboriginal Health (NCCAH)

As part of a 2015 mental health series produced by the NCCAH, the authors, Sherry Bellamy and Cindy Hardy, explore post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression among Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

**Anxiety Disorders and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: The Current State of Knowledge and Directions for Future Research**

This report reviews the limited but relevant literature on anxiety and Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The report speculates that anxiety disorders may be prevalent in Aboriginal communities in Canada, noting that many Aboriginal children and youth are exposed to risk factors for developing anxiety. Additionally, Aboriginal people who relocate from reservations into urban centres may be especially vulnerable to developing anxiety disorders if they are cut off from supportive social networks. Further research is required to determine if anxiety is a problem and its prevalence rates in Canada's Aboriginal peoples.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Aboriginal People in Canada: Review of Risk Factors, the**

### Current State of Knowledge and Directions for Further Research

This report discusses factors that place Aboriginal peoples at risk for the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The report indicates that Aboriginal people in Canada are more likely than non-Aboriginal people to experience traumatic events in their lifetimes including historical, collective, and individual trauma. This is compounded by the fact that many Aboriginal people have stressful living conditions resulting from high levels of poverty and abuse. While the prevalence of PTSD in Canadian Aboriginal peoples is unclear, it is important that culturally-appropriate services are made available to Aboriginal communities across Canada.

### Understanding Depression in Aboriginal Communities and Families

This report provides a brief outline of symptoms of depression, followed by a discussion of depression across cultures and among Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Currently, the prevalence of depression among Aboriginal Canadians compared to non-Aboriginal Canadians is unclear due to conflicting study results. This report reviews potential root causes for depression in Aboriginal people, explores the connection between mental and physical illness, and discusses culturally relevant and appropriate methods of treatment.

These and other NCCAH publications can be found [here](#).

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2. Bellamy, S., & Hardy, C. (2015). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Aboriginal People in Canada: Review of Risk Factors, the Current State of Knowledge and Directions for Further Research. Prince George, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health.
3. Bellamy, S., & Hardy, C. (2015). Understanding Depression in Aboriginal Communities and Families. Prince George, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health.

### Did You Know...?

- Aboriginal people in Alberta have higher rates of suicidal ideation than non-Aboriginal people. Statistics Canada found that 21% of Aboriginal Albertans had ever seriously considered committing suicide compared to only 12% of non-Aboriginal Albertans<sup>1,2\*</sup>.
- Aboriginal women (24%) are more likely to report serious contemplation of suicide than men (16%)<sup>2\*</sup>.
- The prevalence of suicidal thoughts is found to be higher among Aboriginal Canadians who use street or prescription drugs recreationally, report mood or anxiety disorders, and have lower feelings of self-worth<sup>3\*</sup>.
- Aboriginal Albertans are more likely to perceive their own mental health as "fair" or "poor" (11.2%) compared to non-Aboriginal Albertans (7.7%)<sup>1,2\*</sup>.
- Aboriginal women are more likely to rate their mental health as "fair" or "poor" (13.6%) compared to only 7.9% of Aboriginal men<sup>2\*</sup>.

\*The term Aboriginal includes urban First Nations, Métis, and Inuit

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## Research Partnership Program Progress Update

Alberta Centennial Addiction and Mental Health Research Partnership Committee (RPC)



### Thank You Dr. Greenshaw!

Dr. Andrew Greenshaw has served as the Co-Chair of the Alberta Addiction and Mental Health Research Partnership Committee (RPC) since its inception. Over the past 10 years, he has provided support, guidance, oversight, advice, and input for many of the successful endeavors of the Research Partnership Program. His enthusiasm for the work of the Partnership Program has never wavered and he continues to be a strong advocate for addiction and mental health research, programs, services, and knowledge translation in Alberta. Thank you Andy for all your hard work during your tenure as RPC Co-Chair!

### RPC Leadership Update

The Alberta Addiction and Mental Health Research Partnership Program would like to welcome Dr. Frank MacMaster, Scientific Director of the Alberta Health Services Addiction and Mental Strategic Clinical Network, as the new Co-Chair of the Alberta Addiction and Mental Health Research Partnership Committee. He will be joining the current Alberta Health Services Co-Chair, Barry Andres, Executive Director, Provincial Addiction and Mental Health.

Collaborative Research Grant Initiative: Mental Wellness in Seniors and Persons with Disabilities (CRGI)

### Journal Article

Friesen, S., Brémault-Phillips, S., Rudrum, L., & Rogers, L. G. (2016). Environmental design that supports healthy aging: evaluating a new supportive living facility. *Journal of Housing For the Elderly*, 30(1), 18–34.

The built environment of a continuing care facility can have a great influence on the physical and psychological well-being of its residents. This research investigated whether the physical design of a new supportive living environment in Red Deer was meeting the needs of the individuals residing there. Interviews and surveys were conducted with residents about the facility. The researchers found that participants who reported better overall health also reported greater satisfaction with the

facility. These results suggest that person-environment fit can influence quality of life and place attachment, as well as well-being and belonging.

This research was supported by a CRGI Ideas Fund Grant, and was published in the Journal of Housing for the Elderly. It may be accessed [here](#) (subscription may be required).

## Knowledge Translation

### Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is an Alberta Addiction and Mental Health Research Partnership Program produced resource for addiction and mental health practitioners. Each edition of the e-newsletter will focus on one of the four research priorities or cross cutting themes. Bridging the Gap is intended to provide practitioners with brief summaries and implications of recent research in the area of addiction and mental health.

The latest issue of the Bridging the Gap e-newsletter focuses on brain injury. You can view current and past issues [here](#). You can subscribe to Bridging the Gap [here](#).

## Upcoming Events

### [2016 National Mental Health Conference on Promoting the Journey to Healing: Trauma in the Criminal Justice System, Suicide & Mental Health Issues in Aboriginal Communities and within Society Today](#)

March 16–18, 2016  
Winnipeg, MB

### [Aboriginal Peoples and Communities Cultural Awareness Workshop](#)

April 29, 2016  
Grande Prairie, Alberta

### [Closing the Gap: Indigenous Health Innovations Forum](#)

May 25, 2016  
Regina, SK

### [Indigenous Health Conference: Towards Health and Reconciliation](#)

May 26–27, 2016  
Toronto, ON

### [17<sup>th</sup> Canadian Collaborative Mental Health Care Conference](#)

June 17–18, 2016  
Kelowna, BC

### [Indigenous Mental Health Research Workshop](#)

June 27–30, 2016  
Montreal, QC

### [5<sup>th</sup> International Conference and Exhibition on Addiction Research & Therapy](#)

October 3–5, 2016  
Atlanta, GA

## Funding and Job Opportunities

Available on the [Opportunities](#) section of the website.

## Contribute to Knowledge Notes

Knowledge Notes are concise summaries of current research in a specific area. Each note is a maximum of three pages to allow readers to become familiar with a given topic without getting lost in the complexity of a typical academic paper.

If you are interested in writing and submitting a Knowledge Note for publication please read our guidelines. You can also view what others have contributed so far by visiting the [Knowledge Notes](#) section of the website.

If you have an idea for a Knowledge Note and are not certain whether it fits with our guidelines please contact us at [researchpartnership@ahs.ca](mailto:researchpartnership@ahs.ca).

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