



QUESTIONING RESEARCH III:

WHAT DO ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS  
SAY ABOUT HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH?

A GUIDE FOR RESEARCHERS

MARCH 2008

## **Questioning Research III:**

**What Do Aboriginal Community  
Members Say About Homelessness Research?**

**A Guide for Researchers**

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# Introduction

Aboriginal people who are homeless are over-represented in the Canadian statistics and under-represented in the research literature. The Second BC/Yukon Aboriginal Forum on Homelessness Research (November 2006) articulated the need to address this situation by building ongoing communication and trust between researchers (community and academic) and people in the community experiencing homelessness or providing support to people who are homeless.

This publication is intended as a follow-up to the forum and is addressed to academic and community-based researchers who are interested in conducting research around the issue of Aboriginal homelessness in particular, but with marginalized groups in general. It accompanies two other publications, *Questioning Research I: Forum Report (Second BC/Yukon Aboriginal Forum on Homelessness Research)*, which summarizes the discussions at the Forum, and *Questioning Research II: Homelessness Research and Aboriginal Communities (A Guide for Communities)*, a publication intended to support communities in becoming involved with research processes.

One of the initial intentions of the Aboriginal Forum on Homelessness Research was to strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal communities to partner with community-based research organizations, based on an assumption that Aboriginal communities need capacity building support in order to develop effective research projects. It was soon recognized that the issue of capacity building for research is a two-way street. Research organizations (including academic institutions as well as community based researchers) are also very much in need of support in order to develop their capacity to partner with Aboriginal communities and community organizations.

With this background, the question of partnerships became the central theme in organizing and shaping the forum, and with that the dilemma arose of what these partnerships should look like. As planning proceeded some key questions emerged:

1. How do Aboriginal people who are homeless perceive research and researchers?
2. What should these partnerships look like if they are to be respectful and most effective?
3. Is there a model to guide these partnerships?
4. What are the challenges and considerations of these partnerships?
5. Who is responsible for supporting and nurturing these partnerships?

This publication is intended to provide preliminary answers to these questions by exploring issues of partnership development, research methodology and the research agenda from the perspective of those who are too often seen as objects of research and not as important partners in the research process. Although our results are exploratory and not definitive, the lessons learned can be a useful starting point to support research that is responsive to community concerns and issues.

This, then, is neither a 'recipe' nor a comprehensive research report. It is a beginning argument, with a research component based on kitchen table dialogue sessions with a range of participants including adults in Vancouver and youth in Surrey who have experienced homelessness, as well as community members and service providers in Northern Eastern BC communities who are closely involved with housing issues. We argue it is important for researchers to engage participatory methods when doing research on Aboriginal homelessness, present an outline of what that research process might look like, and discuss the complexities of and considerations when conducting research on housing and homelessness issues.

## Research Summary

The conclusions and recommendations in this report are based on three focus group discussions, a review of related literature, and reflections by research team members based on their previous experience working with marginalized populations<sup>1</sup>

The focus groups, organized in partnership with Aboriginal community organizations in each location, were intended to provide an opportunity for those who are usually the objects of research to provide their feedback on the research process. The focus group locations and community partner organizations (identified in brackets) were:

1) **Vancouver Downtown Eastside Focus Group** (Aboriginal Front Door Society) - a focus group involving people experiencing homelessness in the Downtown East side area of Vancouver. This focus group was comprised of street entrenched adults who were in a crisis situation, had been longer in that situation, and had previously been “research subjects” or practicum recipients. There was a strong resentment towards strangers parachuting in to their community, working as practicum students or researchers and then leaving and never contacting them again. Because the DTES is an area noted for its high incidences of poverty, drug addiction, prostitution, and some violent crime, as well as its ongoing tradition of community activism, and sense of community, DTES organizations are common practicum student sites, and the people frequent research subjects.

2) **Surrey Youth Focus Group** (All Nations Safe House, Kla-How-Eya Aboriginal Friendship Centre) – a focus group involving current and former residents of the All Nations Youth Safe House, a project of the Kla-How-Eya Aboriginal Centre in Surrey. The Surrey youth focus group included youth who were less street entrenched (i.e. couch surfing, staying in shelters), closer to having been (or still were) in school, had fairly recently done research projects themselves, and who clearly had not been ‘researched to death’ or received service from practicum students. There was palatable hope within this group, and a far more positive perspective on research’s potential for action and change. The focus was also on youth-related issues regarding why they were homeless, the details of which are integrated in the discussion portion of the paper.

3) **North Eastern BC Communities Focus Group** (Nawican Friendship Centre, Dawson Creek) – a focus group involving community members and service providers from Dawson Creek, Fort St. John and The Halfway River First Nation, organized in partnership with the Nawican Friendship Centre in Dawson Creek. A follow-up interview was conducted with a Fort St. John service provider who provided further insight into issues unique to Northern Aboriginal peoples. In contrast to the Downtown Eastside group, North Eastern BC Focus Group participants agreed that issues relating to homelessness and Aboriginal peoples in the North were largely ignored by researchers, policy makers and other decision makers. Instead of being “researched to death” members of this group complained forcefully that they were tired of being ignored. Participants also expressed their frustration that issues relating to housing and homelessness were seen as “big city issues” a focus which took attention away from the very real issues relating to affordable housing and homelessness occurring in rural and Northern communities.

### Indigenous versus Aboriginal peoples?

A number of contested terms in Aboriginal communities are used in referring to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. It is important to understand the origin and definition of the terms because each term has a distinct history, culture, legal entitlement and relationship to colonization in Canada. For the purposes of this paper, we shall use the term Aboriginal people(s) when discussing members of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit groups. This is because we are looking at homelessness as a policy issue and the term Aboriginal people(s) is used most often in a policy context. Furthermore, this community-based research took place within Aboriginal communities and with organizations wherein most organizations self-identify as Aboriginal (e.g. Friendship and Cultural Centres).

1. The research team included one member with an Aboriginal background and extensive experience working with Aboriginal organizations, another member who was a researcher from a confluence of minority groups with an academic background and extensive experience working with marginalized populations, as well as a SPARC BC Project Coordinator with experience working on a range of community issues. See Acknowledgements section for further information on the Research Team members.

2. While the other two groups consisted primarily of people who had experienced homelessness we chose a broader scope for inclusion in this group. The factors involved in this decision included (1) the relative complexity of identifying those who are homeless in Northern communities and (2) an understanding that people living in the North are part of a marginalized community especially when it comes to housing and homelessness issues.

# Identifying the Issues

The focus group research was intended to help articulate the perspective of Aboriginal community members living close to the issues of housing and homelessness on research and the research process. Specific questions asked to participants were:

- What does research mean to you?
- What's wrong with research?
- How should the research process and outcome make you feel?
- What are some suggested research projects?

## Community Perceptions of research: What does research mean to you?

There is an ongoing debate in academic circles about whether research should be pure or applied – whether research should be conducted for its own sake to increase knowledge, or whether research should be used with the purpose of developing concrete solutions to defined problems.

Focus group participants fall firmly on the side of the debate that argues that research into social issues such as homelessness must be applied research. It is not enough to simply gather evidence about social issues -- research must play a direct role in bringing about solutions to the problems being documented, according to members of all three focus groups. These comments point to the high expectations that community members have that the money that supports research should result in demonstrable benefits for the community.

Despite the variety of experience and background there was general consensus among all focus group members that research should have a practical outcome that positively changes the situation of people experiencing homelessness. This can be achieved either by increasing public knowledge regarding the root causes of homelessness or by supporting the development of concrete socio-environmental changes. "There is an awareness of a gap that needs filling and the research piece verifies that gap ... research helps to identify how to meet the needs," said a Fort St. John service provider.

There was a range of opinion about other aspects of research among focus group participants that varied according to social and geographical context. For example, Downtown Eastside Focus Group respondents (who, in general, had many negative things to say about research) were also able to articulate many potential positive benefits. For this group, on the negative side, research means: "food", and "being a guinea pig." On the positive side research means: "gathering information," "investigating," "sharing what's on your mind," and "a political and scientific word that can be used as a tool to get what you need (i.e. a grant or media coverage)."

The Surrey Youth Focus Group did not say anything negative about research. For this group, research meant "finding information" and "learning and discovering new things." It was also agreed that research should be solution based and action-oriented depending on the particular community's need(s).

Members of the North Eastern BC Communities focus group articulated several important ways in which research could be used to support the development of solutions to issues related to housing and homelessness:

- Document the unique issues of Northern communities (e.g. the economies of Northern communities (including communities experiencing either economic boom times or economic downturn)) and special issues such as weather, transportation, migration between reservations and regional community centres.
- Link anecdotal information to the development of quantitative and qualitative information that can support the development of new services. For example, several focus group participants had noticed people congregating overnight around a local donut shop, had seen more and more young women on the street apparently involved

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## Aboriginal Homelessness and Aboriginal Homelessness Research

Although there are similar risk precipitators for homelessness in all communities, it is the socio-political historical context of Aboriginal peoples in Canada that makes Aboriginal homelessness and Aboriginal homelessness research unique and more complex. This context has created a lack of trust, the need for relationships and inclusion in order to meaningfully engage Aboriginal peoples in any research studies, and research that is solution-focused because of the myriad internal and external issues and factors that need to be addressed for Aboriginal communities to heal and strengthen.

### *How is homelessness different in Aboriginal communities?*

While the risk precipitators may be different and greater for Aboriginal people, ultimately the reasons why Aboriginal people become homeless are similar to those that are cited in popular analysis: lack of housing, lack of income; lack of supports. However, the continued systemic oppression of Aboriginal people means that the reasons why Aboriginal people are homeless are greater, more complex, and more systemically ingrained than reasons for homelessness among the general population.

The powerful forces of racism that prevent Aboriginal people from obtaining housing and employment must not be underestimated. This unique set of circumstances explains why Aboriginal people are so disproportionately represented among the homeless, and why Aboriginal people also remain homeless.

A 2005 homelessness count undertaken in Metro Vancouver found that “people with Aboriginal identity were significantly over-represented among the region’s homeless compared to their share of the total population (30% compared to 2%).”

Another layer of complexity concerns Aboriginal peoples living in Northern communities, such as Prince George, Fort St. John and Prince Rupert where being Aboriginal and homeless means different things. For instance, according to the service provider interviewed in Fort St. John the cost of living is very high because of the booming oil industry, even though only approximately 40% work in the oil patch. Room and board is a minimum \$500/month, there is little subsidized or non-subsidized housing, and, being in the North, goods are more costly.

In short, people cannot live in Fort St. John without a well-paying job. Furthermore, Northern communities are isolated, have inadequate servicing and are often overlooked in research studies because they are remote and costly to access. Where research studies do include Northern Aboriginal populations, the researchers are usually non-Aboriginals who come in, take needed information, leave and do not follow-up with the research results and/or subsequent actions undertaken. This process results in feelings of resentment and reticence to participate in research.

A comprehensive approach to documenting Aboriginal homelessness must be developed. The literature suggests that First Nations people experience a high level of mobility between their home communities and urban centres, often relying on the hospitality of friends and family for shelter. We need to develop an understanding of the numbers of “at risk” Aboriginal homeless people, and the ways in which they can be supported. Certain researchers suggest that the profile of Aboriginal homelessness needs to be developed on a geographical basis, since the causes and solutions may be different based on the distinct situations of each area.

### *How is doing research with Aboriginal homeless people different than with other communities?*

What arose from this mini-research project was that trust and relationships mean actively including local Aboriginal peoples who have experienced homelessness in the entire research process, from formulating the research question to disseminating the report and following-up on any subsequent actions incited in the report. Local Aboriginal peoples know local community protocol, and have community connections and knowledge. They can act as guides - the experts - because it is their community. Since it is practically almost impossible, as a researcher – even an Aboriginal researcher – to know every local community and its protocol there needs to be a different type of research process and structure. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) offers this alternative structure and process.

in prostitution, and have noticed increasing rates of inter-personal violence. It was widely understood by community members that these trends were intimately linked to issues of housing and poverty, but there was no data available in a form that could be used to communicate with decision makers about the issues.

- Develop and evaluate pilot projects that could point the way to long term solutions and strategies
- Support communities to develop capacity to conduct their own research and to participate in and influence research projects initiated by outsiders.

### **Key Issues**

#### **According to focus group participants, effective research:**

- Should be solution-based and action-oriented - research should have a practical outcome that positively changes a homeless person's situation, either by an increase in public knowledge regarding the root causes of homelessness or by concrete socio-environmental changes
- Increases awareness of a gap that needs to be filled
- Helps identify how to meet needs
- Enables people to learn new things
- Enables people to share what's on their mind
- Is a political and scientific word that can be used as a tool to get what you need
- Can show a connection between socio-political changes and society's worsening conditions for particular groups
- Can result in cynicism among those living in over-researched communities. Street entrenched people may have more negative perceptions of research and be more demanding of respect from outsiders coming into their community
- Can provide validation and documentation of unique realities and circumstances (e.g. issues specific to Northern communities)
- Provide information on the relationship between the housing market and the needs of people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.
- Strengthen the advocacy voice of the community by providing information on the dimensions of the problems, its causes, and potential solutions.

## Understanding the problems: What's wrong with the current research practices?

Participants identified several negative aspects of research including issues of process, outcome and costs (human and monetary). For example, it was suggested that a research process in which the researchers do not know the local community or its protocol can be perceived as being disrespectful and in turn leave participants with a disrespectful attitude toward researchers and the research process.

Other examples of disrespectful research practices include:

- Ignoring Aboriginal protocol(s) (i.e. acknowledging traditional territories, opening and closing expressions, and considering the role of elders),
- Leaving insufficient time for closure at the end of a focus group that may be emotional to the participants,
- Lengthy interviews
- Inappropriate or abstract questions
- A formal interview or focus group structure
- Not being involved in the whole research process

These were all identified as elements of a research process that had potential to create upset among community members. Top-down research with researchers parachuting in and leaving without following-up, can make Aboriginal homeless subjects feel frustrated, angry and hurt. The process "shouldn't make me feel "frustrated, confused or stupid." [We] "should be able to understand [the questions and the final report]."

An example of some of these frustrations occurred during the Downtown Eastside focus group. Nearly half of the participants in this group left the session early and did not return from a scheduled break. Many of those who remained appeared annoyed and agitated with the process. Some voiced concerns based on previous experiences with practicum students and others coming into the community for their own purposes and seemed unclear about who facilitators were and why they were there. In a follow up conversation with a worker from the community partner agency, researchers learned that many participants had been worried about losing access to prime sleeping locations on a day when heavy rains meant there would be a great deal of competition for dry and safe sleeping locations. Lessons learned from this process are outlined later in this document.

Members of the Downtown Eastside Group voiced strong frustration and anger at the millions of dollars spent on research to which the people most in need of that money do not perceive to benefit, either directly or indirectly. "The money spent on research could go towards a solution that has already been researched." "There are lots of reports that have been made and the powers that be don't pay attention to them ... they should spend more money on reading the solutions and implementing them."

While it can be argued that in the long run research can and does result in concrete social change, it is also true that people who are homeless and participating in research projects (and most other research participants for that matter) rarely see the entire process from beginning to end. Most research participants, with the exception of those involved in highly participatory processes, miss out on the conceptualization of the research project, identification of the research process, data analysis, knowledge transfer and other follow up activities. Because the time between the conception of research and its possible impacts can often be measured in terms of decades, an individual research participant may be unaware of their contribution to positive change and may rarely see the direct outcomes of their participation and support.

3. Centre for Native Policy and Research, November 2005 "An Urban Aboriginal Life. The 2005 Indicators Report on the Quality of Life of Aboriginal People in the Greater Vancouver Regional District".

Moreover, an incomplete or undeveloped research process yields an incomplete picture. For instance, according to 2001 Statistics Canada, 57% of all Aboriginal people live in urban areas yet there is a dearth of information available regarding this portion of the Aboriginal population. The Centre for Native Policy and Research (CNPR) reports that issues relating to urban Aboriginal people are under-represented in statistical information. "All levels of government (federal, provincial, and municipal) continue to focus much of their efforts on Land Claims and Treaty negotiations. While critically important issues, such a strong focus allows the social, economic, and environmental issues affecting the complex mix of urban Aboriginal people – Status and non-Status First Nations, Métis, and Inuit – to fall through the cracks."<sup>3</sup>

The Centre calls for better data gathering that includes gathering and publishing vital statistics of all Aboriginal peoples, including Métis, all First Nations, and Inuit, not just of Status Indians.<sup>4</sup> In addition, CNPR calls for a comprehensive approach to documenting homelessness in the Aboriginal community, other than solely periodic 24-hour counts, which, while extremely useful, do not provide the complete picture.<sup>5</sup> Members of the North Eastern BC Communities discussion group complained that research projects focus too often on the Lower Mainland or larger population centres. It is difficult for communities to make the case for additional resources and solutions for community issues such as homelessness if issues are not documented at a local level.

### **Key Issues**

#### **According to focus group participants, a comprehensive approach to research would include the following elements:**

- Aboriginal researchers, who are of the local community and know its protocol need to be involved in the research project's design and execution
- Participants should feel respected so that they participate willingly
- Sufficient time for closure is left at the end of a focus group that may be emotional to the participants
- Interviews are kept short and to the point
- Create questions clearly related to direct experiences that show potential for action
- Utilize an informal information gathering style wherever possible
- Consider report's possible implications once released
- Follow-up so that participants are aware of any positive social change to which their participation has contributed
- Ensure that descriptions and categories recognize the diversity of experience and background among Aboriginal peoples and avoid perpetuating stereotypes
- Recognize and support community assets by documenting community strengths and successes in dealing with challenges as well as the courage and resourcefulness of those experiencing homelessness
- Ensure full statistical information is available both for Status-Indians living on reserve as well as the full range of those with Aboriginal background living off reserve
- Homeless counts other than solely periodic 24-hour counts
- An analysis or depiction of how the structures intended to support fail or fall short
- Consideration of the unique circumstances of each community (i.e. do not assume that research based in the Lower Mainland can provide understanding about homelessness in rural and Northern parts of the province).
- Leave a legacy of community capacity that supports ongoing research that documents and addresses community issues

4. Centre for Native Policy and Research, November 2005

5. Centre for Native Policy and Research, November 2005



## Articulating Solutions: What would make research processes and outcomes a positive experience for participants?

Participants were asked how the research process and outcome should leave them feeling. They said they wanted to feel good about themselves because they have actively been a part of the process, and confident there will be improvement in their situation. Participants also suggested there should be a balance between reporting and action-oriented goals.

In their own words, participants said the process should make them feel:

- “Satisfied”
- “At ease”
- “[With a sense of] justice and accomplishment”
- “Like I’m going to be housed”
- “Like I’m part of a solution”
- “Like you’re getting somewhere, not going in circles”

Participants said that the outcome should make them feel:

- “Positive about myself because there’s balanced feedback ... have talked to other homeless people ... not judge people or blame them for being homeless.”
- “[The report has] the real facts and understands the real reasons why a person is homeless (i.e. discrimination of landlord towards youth, insufficient number of shelters/safe houses).”
- “Not frustrated, confused or stupid”
- “Able to understand it [because] it [is]: more visual and youth-oriented/relevant, straightforward ... I’ve done research and read reports and they go around and around the issue. It makes me frustrated and confused ... I may get one or two facts out of three or four pages.”
- “Speaking frankly it doesn’t change how I feel because it’s just stats. If they give me a hundred bucks that’s different.”  
Seeing a draft of the report and/or one written in his/her own words was also identified as enhancing the experience of being part of a research project.

Participants in the North Eastern BC focus group did not directly address this question. However, in response to other questions many voiced their desire for recognition and validation of the unique circumstances of Northern communities. Many expressed strong concern that they did not see the unique circumstances and challenges of their communities reflected in research studies that address homelessness issues.

## Next Steps: What are some suggested action-oriented research projects?

The recommendations on the following pages have been distilled from notes of the three focus group discussions. They are intended to illustrate the issues connected to homelessness research that most concern community members. Included in each section is a summary of the issue, some points of background, and specific research recommendations articulated by focus group participants.

### Recommendation 1.

#### **1. Accurate and relevant statistical information:**

Provide more accurate numbers about Aboriginal homelessness that recognize a variety of experiences and backgrounds including First Nations (on and off reserve), Métis, and Inuit. Pay attention to special issues within Aboriginal groups such as youth, elders, rural communities, women, and families.

#### **Context:**

- Statistics are the primary basis upon which many programs and policies are developed.
- Development of a definition of homelessness that incorporates a range of experiences and situations (i.e. takes into account issues such as “couch surfing”, weather and transportation issues in the Northern context).
- Currently, the census data under-represents homeless Aboriginal people because they are without a fixed address, the census gatherers are non-Aboriginal locals, and/or the subjects are non-status Aboriginals. The lack of accurate census data contributes to a cycle of denial and inaction that characterizes policy responses to homelessness as it affects Aboriginal peoples. If the situation is not validated by statistical information then it can be more easily ignored.
- Gathering census data for homeless Aboriginal peoples, however, is complex and challenging due to a number of factors including issues of culture (including local cultural differences), definition (who is officially considered Aboriginal?) and logistics (difficulties in locating homeless individuals).
- Utilizing a community-based approach, the GVRD 2005 homeless count method in partnership with SPARC BC is one way of beginning to address this incorrect representation. Local Aboriginal people who knew local cultural protocol and who knew where local Aboriginal homeless people congregated were a key part of the process.

#### **Research Suggestions:**

- Enhance the statistical gathering process by making it more participatory. Hire homeless people (or people who have experienced homelessness) to participate in the entire process. Gather data about which group the person comes (i.e. Métis, Inuit, status or non-status, etc), and advocate for changes to the current official category that includes only status-Indians in census data.
- Work with community service agencies to ensure the completion of census forms by homeless individuals in the community.
- Support communities in documenting their own issues by developing and supporting the utilization of tools (e.g. homeless count methodology) that can document the local situation on an ongoing basis.
- Understand and take into account the complex relationship between on-reserve and off reserve issues. This includes migration between reserves and nearby communities in the surrounding region, and major provincial urban centres.
- Understand the housing market in Northern and rural communities. For example, the housing market in Dawson Creek is impacted by factors such as retired individuals moving into the area from urban centres as well as the economic impact of the Oil and Gas industry.
- Other issues related to the housing market in Northern and rural communities include the conversion of rental accommodation to market housing, and attempts by some landlords to remove long-standing tenants in order to make more money off of Oil and Gas workers.

## Recommendation 2.

### **2. Access to housing: Support research that leads to improved access to subsidized housing.**

#### **Context:**

- A number of reports and studies support the development of a continuum of housing options including emergency shelters, transitional housing, supportive, and independent housing.<sup>6</sup>
- Aboriginal adults and youth are homeless because of inadequate or inappropriate subsidized housing.
- Lack of a damage deposit, age requirements, addictions issues, the transition from being homeless to housed, cultural issues, and/or discrimination, are all factors that contribute to homelessness among adults and youth in the Aboriginal community.

#### **Research suggestions:**

- A CBPR approach could support Aboriginal homeless adults and/or youth to actively participate in research and conduct needs assessments in their local community. Community based researchers can gather information about what are the barriers, what would appropriate subsidizing housing look like, and who are the homeless Aboriginal peoples that are needing to be housed.
- Examine emergency shelter needs (including extreme weather strategies) in rural and Northern communities.
- Support the development of housing options for those who have completed Alcohol and Drug Treatment or hospitalization.

## Recommendation 3.

### **3. Access to support: Explore the accessibility and availability of current supports available to homeless Aboriginal peoples – such as medical services, access to damage deposit, legal resources, landlord/tenant relations, homeless shelters, and native-run agencies.**

#### **Context:**

- Development of a continuum of supports has been recommendation of a number of studies.<sup>7</sup>
- In addition to the insufficient supports and housing for Aboriginal homeless peoples due to the lack of accurate statistics, a number of currently available supports are considered inaccessible.
- One focus group participant noted that a First Nations youth leaving a reserve in the North and travelling to Vancouver will experience as much culture shock as any immigrant moving to Canada from outside the country. And yet supports are not in place to address issues of transition.

#### **Research suggestions:**

- Use research (including surveys, interviews, and demographic information) to develop a clear picture of what supports are available, and the barriers to accessing these supports to particular demographic groups. Research methodology should include Aboriginal homeless adults and youth throughout the process.
- Explore the links between housing and support services (e.g. addiction treatment, health services, mental health).
- Document and explore delivery issues including centralization of provincial services, transportation, hours of operation, staff recruitment and support, youth issues.

6. Metro Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. Regional Homelessness Plan for Greater Vancouver (2003).

7. Metro Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. Regional Homelessness Plan for Greater Vancouver (2003).

#### Recommendation 4.

**4. Identify issues specific to Aboriginal people:** Provide in-depth information on the reasons why Aboriginal people are homeless. Participants identified specific issues such as the housing and rental market, access to support services, family issues, educational system, and youth-related issues.

**Context:**

- Recognize the devastating impact of the residential schools policy on Aboriginal culture and document its links to homelessness issues.
- Understand and document migration and connections between home communities and urban centres.

**Research suggestions:**

- Counter blame and judgment by providing information on the roots of Aboriginal people's homelessness.
- An in-depth study exploring the roots of Aboriginal homelessness could bring all the above factors together to present a truer picture and stronger argument for changes to address these issues as they uniquely exist in the diverse Aboriginal communities throughout British Columbia.
- Focus on Northern communities and cultures so that their unique situation is better understood and appropriate solutions are created for their communities.

#### Recommendation 5.

**5. Identify solutions:** Utilize research funds to develop and test pilot projects utilizing innovative approaches to Aboriginal Homelessness Issues.

**Context:**

- Focus group participants noted that the disparity between funds available for research on homelessness and the funds available for the development and implementation of long-term solutions is a fundamental issue that needs to be recognized and addressed.
- Unique and creative community-based solutions can be developed based on support and partnership with community organizations.

**Research suggestions:**

- Work with community based organizations to develop and evaluate pilot programs that address community priorities.
- For example, participants from Northern communities identified follow-up to drug and residential alcohol and drug treatment programs as a critical issue. A project testing and evaluating strategies to address this issue could help address this important contributing factor to homelessness.

## Recommendation 6.

**6. Coordinate research:** Ensure better coordination of research studies to avoid duplication and enhance follow up.

**Context:**

- Some aspects of homelessness are over-researched while other important issues remain undocumented.
- Focus group participants from the Downtown Eastside complained about the number of research projects and the lack of concrete results.
- Participants from the North complained that their issues were largely hidden and undocumented.

**Research suggestions:**

- Review the recommendations for future research projects at the end of research reports, then make sure they have not already been done.
- Based on a review of recommendations from previous research reports, design a research project that looks at the barriers to implementation for those recommendations that have not been completed.

## Recommendation 7.

**7. Respect the needs of people who are homeless:** Ensure that research processes involving people who are homeless recognize and incorporate the unique circumstance of living without a home.

**Context:**

- Innovative techniques that ensure engagement and participation by community members need to be utilized.
- The daily survival needs of people living with homelessness need to be understood and supported. Research should not place a burden on those living on the margins.
- Recognize the strengths and dignity of people who are homeless.

**Research suggestions:**

Research project design should address a number of key issues

- Develop protocols and guidelines that ensure participants are aware of who is conducting the research and why.
- Ensure that participants have access to a summary of research notes within a timely manner
- Be flexible regarding issues such as weather and access to food and shelter

# Working Towards an Aboriginal Homeless CBPR Model

Although participants had a wide range of experience and understanding regarding research, their responses, observations and recommendations underline the importance of the 4R's of Aboriginal Health as articulated by the BC Aboriginal Capacity and Developmental Research Environment (ACADRE):

- **Respect** - demonstrated to Aboriginal culture and communities by valuing their diverse knowledge of their community and experience of being homeless.
- **Relevance** - of the issue to culture and community is critical for success of any Aboriginal research project.
- **Reciprocity** - occurs via a mutual process of learning and research exchange between the Aboriginal/homeless community researchers and the non-Aboriginal/homeless researchers
- **Responsibility** - is empowerment that is “fostered through active and rigorous engagement and participation.”<sup>8</sup>

Respect is demonstrated to Aboriginal culture and communities by valuing diverse ways of knowing about the community and about the experience of homelessness. For example, the concept of “homelessness” takes on new and deeper meaning when the importance of place, relationship to the land, and community in traditional Aboriginal cultures is fully understood.

Relevance of the issue to culture and community is critical for success of any Aboriginal research project. Reciprocity occurs via a mutual process of learning and research exchange between the Aboriginal/homeless community researchers and the non-Aboriginal/homeless researchers. Responsibility is empowerment that is “fostered through active and rigorous engagement and participation.”<sup>9</sup>

Fig. 1 is intended to illustrate how these principles can be developed at each stage of research projects. Understanding different perspectives on each stage of the research project is important because misunderstanding and miscommunication at any stage of the research process can lead to major problems as research progresses.

The focus group discussions also helped illustrate the dilemmas associated with the use of community based participatory research as a strategy to address issues such as homelessness in Aboriginal communities. The experience of focus group participants as well as previous experiences of us and other researchers help identify a number of considerations and challenges including power and control, employment, and education.

## Being open about power and control

One essential question concerns the issue of respect. How can lead researchers demonstrate their respect for the communities they are working with? What does respect mean to community members and how can it be communicated? Identifying issues of power and control are an important part of these discussions. Who controls what, and who has the power to make decisions?

Mainstream researchers possess more power and control than do the community-based research participants. This fact must be brought out into the open as it is always present in the minds of those who do not have it, and will express itself at some point. Issues related to power and control include:

- **Colonialism** – A legacy of unresolved trauma that resonates through the generations has been left by policies based on colonial assumptions. Although some healing has been accomplished, much remains to be done to address the long term effects of residential schools, suppression of potlatch ceremonies, and other misguided policies.

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8. BC ACADRE, University of British Columbia ([www.health-disciplines.ubc.ca/iah/acadre/](http://www.health-disciplines.ubc.ca/iah/acadre/)) BC ACADRE has amalgamated with the Network Environments for Aboriginal Research BC (NEAR BC). For more information see: [www.nearbc.ca](http://www.nearbc.ca)

9. Ibid.

Fig. 1. Research Stages

Research Perspective	Community Perspective	Why it should be participatory	How it can be participatory
Formulating a research question	What do we want to find out?	Makes it more relevant, appropriate and chance that it is needed.	Consult with community members regarding community issues and priorities for research.
Planning the study	How will we find the answer?	Helps to ensure that the research plan and methodologies are appropriate for use in that community.	Consult with community members on appropriate research plans and methodologies.
Collecting data	What information can we gather from what sources?	Include community members as part of the research team to go out and collect the data, i.e. conduct the surveys and interview, etc.	The community's meaningful involvement in collecting data allows the research process to benefit from their insights, and also promotes community ownership of the research process.
Analyzing data	What does the information tell us?	Include community members in the data analysis	Community members can bring important insights and perspectives to the research findings which may have not been otherwise considered.
Developing actions based on the data collected	What we need to do about our problem?	Helps to ensure that the action is relevant and appropriate and responds to community needs.	Include community members in deciding which aspects of the program to evaluate and how to evaluate it.
Analyzing/reflecting on actions	What have we done? What still needs to be done?	The community's meaningful involvement in evaluating allows the program evaluation to benefit from their insights and perspectives. It enables an evaluation process which better examines whether the program is effective in the eyes of the community.	Include community members in deciding which aspects of the program to evaluate and how to evaluate it.
Disseminating results (Knowledge Transfer)	Who needs to know the results and what's the best way to communicate with them?	Include community members in deciding which aspects of the program to evaluate and how to evaluate it. The community's meaningful involvement allows the research dissemination to benefit from their insights and perspectives, and promotes community ownership [and legitimacy] of the research process.	Share findings with the community. Involve community members in sharing the findings both with the community and at professional seminars.

Adapted from Shallwani & Mohammed, 2007

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- **Oppression** – Issues of oppression and marginalization may include both visible and hidden elements. For example race and gender are often visible while issues of poverty, disability, and sexual identity may or may not be visible.
- **Social class** – A full understanding of the implications of class is often hidden in mainstream North American culture. As well, the privileges that are enjoyed by many in the academic community may be taken for granted and not explicitly recognized.
- **Economics** – There is often a wage disparity between the professional researchers and community-based researchers even though the latter may be providing essential and valuable insights and knowledge. Proper compensation and recognition is an important element of any community based research project.
- **Decision making and control of the final product** – It is important to identify at the outset who makes the final decisions and why. This can help avoid problems and misunderstanding based on the divergent needs of communities and academic institutions.

*The View from the Sidewalk*, is a research study that illustrates both strengths and the dilemmas of a community based approach.<sup>10</sup> Conducted in 2001, the project brought a group of current and formerly homeless people together to develop a definition of homelessness that incorporated the experience of people who had experienced homelessness. Calling themselves the Organic Intellectuals<sup>11</sup> the group conducted interviews across BC with people with experience of homelessness supported by researchers with mainstream experience.

In the report, the community researchers noted that an “unwritten understanding” of equality between the community and mainstream researchers was the root of a number of serious clashes as the project progressed. Had the inequities and differences been made transparent at the onset, there would have been recourse to that discussion once differences arose.

People who are members of marginalized groups often feel silenced and invisible in mainstream discourses. For example, a major tension existed in the project between expectations of the perceived audience (policymakers and decision makers) and the expectations of the community researchers. Some community researchers felt silenced because the style and structure of the final report was designed by the mainstream researchers to address the intended audience. Community researchers complained that important voices and styles were excluded. However, after much discussion it was decided it was better to get a foot in the door rather than to alienate the intended audience. A section of team member observations presented material that directly expressed the experiences and voice of the community based researchers as well as the mainstream consultants that worked on the project.

### Important lessons from this process include:

- 1) Never have unwritten understandings’ because they lead to assumptions which lead to expectations which have a chance of falling short and creating dissatisfaction and resentment.
- 2) Before starting the project ensure all team members have had an opportunity to discuss the inequalities and differences and how they will or are likely to arise during the project.
- 3) Develop a process to complement the practice of CBPR that takes into consideration and makes transparent the differences in power and control of all research team members.
- 4) Include a discussion about the audience(s) for the final report including how that will influence structure, style and how the information will be presented.

## Community-based participatory research (CBPR)

### **CBPR is defined as:**

a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings, CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community and is characterized by authentic partnerships, meaningful community engagement, and community capacity building that combine knowledge with action to achieve social change.

Collaboration, education and action are the three key elements to a participatory research framework that responds to issues within a social and historical context .

CBPR embraces a considerably different process and outcome than more traditional forms of academic research largely conducted through universities. Academic research has traditionally been focused on acquiring information to add to and complement an existing body of information. The research is neither intended to directly benefit the communities, or subjects involved nor to include the subjects' input or participation in the research process.

The implication in communities, particularly marginalized communities, is that they may feel 'researched to death,' as in the downtown eastside (DTES) of Vancouver. Researchers are perceived to be privileged, often young, individuals or students who parachute in, 'use' the community members as subjects for their project, or to further their career, or in the case of consultants act as "Poverty Pimps" who make their living off the backs of the poor. These community perceptions exist, obviously, at the extreme end of a spectrum but it is important to be aware that they do exist, particularly in heavily researched communities, and with extremely marginalized groups.

Ironically, it is via a groundbreaking CBPR research project – a partnership between UBC's DTES Humanities 101 course and homeless researchers - "Towards a New Definition of People Who are Homeless," that the subjects' perspective on researchers emerged. In the case of the homeless, homelessness and poverty are almost always linked. Therefore, the issue becomes one of class and a gap between "us" and "them" comes into play, no matter how good are the intentions of those doing the research.

CBPR can render data more relevant because it improves the quality and validity of the research, by strengthening the project's design and implementation as it draws on local community expertise in guiding and informing the project. The process itself has numerous benefits, in that it enhances trust, strengthens relationships, and offers mutual learning. Community members can learn research techniques which enhance their skill-base, and researchers gain privileged entry into a different community thereby enhancing data validity and the report's depth and uniqueness. Lastly, CBPR has the potential to translate research findings into policy change at best, or at the very least create a document that policy-makers will read.

On a smaller scale, important lessons were learned from members of the Downtown Eastside Focus Group. Some participants showed their displeasure with the process by leaving early or by expressing negativity about the event. Based on follow up conversations with community members, recommendations for future events of this kind include:

- 1) Develop a clear partnership agreement with community organizations that articulates roles, responsibilities and expectations. Do not assume that service providers and those using services have a common interest on all issues.
- 2) Communicate clearly about the purpose of the event identifying the researchers and research organizations involved and the intended outcomes. Address issues of compensation, recognition, and follow up.
- 3) Work in advance with community members to identify and address logistical issues. For example, the timing of meetings may be affected by issues such as the weather, schedules and policies for other services (e.g. the need to line up for shelters, meal programs, and food banks), and other factors unique to the lives of people living without housing.
- 4) Create a discussion summary that can be distributed immediately so that research participants do not have to wait for a final product to learn how their input has been interpreted.

10. Organic Intellectuals, The View from the Sidewalk: Towards a New Definition of People who are Homeless, December, 2001 (iocc.ca/documents/ViewFrom Sidewalk.pdf)

11. The term "Organic Intellectual" was borrowed from the work of Antonio Gramsci, the 20th century Italian philosopher.

## Who to employ at what stage?

Members of the Surrey Youth Focus Group felt strongly that, ideally, community members directly involved with the issues the research is about should be involved at every stage as paid researchers and assistant researchers. If it is not possible to directly include local Aboriginal homeless members in the research process, they should be included on a research advisory panel.

In both situations however their participation must be fairly compensated, according to focus group members. Compensation can be a highly complex issue which, even when thoughtfully approached, may not satisfy all participants' expectations. For example, providing an honorarium in the form of a cheque or cash can lead to problems with income assistance programs. For these reason other forms of gratitude are often given such as meals, grocery store coupons, bus tickets, etc.

Based on our experience, some ways to approach the issue of compensation are:

- 1) Discuss the issue with the organization hosting the research (or other knowledgeable organizations) and let them be your guide.
- 2) Another idea is to let your CBPR's and/or advisory group inform you of their perception of desirable compensation.
- 3) Whichever method is chosen it is important to be open about this process with the research participants.

Realistically, homeless Aboriginal community members may not have the privilege or ability to participate at every stage, because of their personal situation. Given this reality, one suggestion is to employ Aboriginal people who have experienced homeless in the past, and/or youth who are less street entrenched, and who don't suffer from severe drug addiction or alcoholism. This will mean working with people at various stages of recovery so it is important to be aware of where the person is at in their recovery as well as any mental/health issues in order to give appropriate tasks and to have appropriate expectations.

## Mutual education and training

Mutual education and training for community members can be important element of research projects. For example, in a Prince George project<sup>12</sup> mainstream researchers got hands-on experience of being homeless by going 'homeless for the night.' Mutual training and education should also occur while teaching research skills and techniques.

It is important to build into the research design some openness and flexibility around these issues to take different needs among community members into account. For example, the Downtown Eastside Focus Group did not mention the need for direct participation, but urged researchers to keep sessions short, the questions straightforward, and to not paraphrase responses when reporting out. The Surrey Youth Focus Group, on the other hand, had a completely different set of expectations. Their objection was that there wasn't an Aboriginal homeless youth employed as part of the research process. They urged researchers to include strategies for including skills, training and participation for youth who have experienced homelessness.

12. Stuart, Jody. A Place to Call My Own: Sexual Exploitation in Northern BC. For more information on this project see "Community-Based Research: Shifting the Western Gaze toward Aboriginality" in *Questing Research II: Homelessness Research and Aboriginal Communities (A guide for communities)* pp. 11 - 13.

# Conclusion: Research must be seen to be done

The focus group discussions confirmed and further articulated many issues that have been present throughout the activities connected to the Aboriginal Forum on Homelessness Research. One constant over the course of these activities has been a considerable level of mistrust and outright hostility to the research process. This mistrust cannot be ignored. It results from a number of central issues that must be taken into account in the development of further research. These include:

- 1) The severity and immediacy of the problems surrounding housing and homelessness for people at the community level
- 2) The lack of effective strategies and resources to deal with a problem which people living and working at the community level see to be of urgent concern.
- 3) The discrepancy between the funds available for research and the funding available for implementation of solutions based on the recommendations of the research.
- 4) Some communities such as Vancouver's Downtown Eastside are over-researched while others such as rural and Northern communities are desperate for research that validates the perception of many that there is a growing and serious problem.
- 5) The perception that research is most often being done for its own sake and is not directly linked to outcomes that improve the quality of life for those experiencing homelessness at the community level.

## RESOURCES \*

### Organizations:

Aboriginal Capacity Development (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)):  
[www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/ab/](http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/ab/)

Centre for Native Policy and Research (CNPR):  
[www.cnpr.ca](http://www.cnpr.ca)

Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH): [www.ccph.info/](http://www.ccph.info/)

National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO): [www.naho.ca](http://www.naho.ca)

Network Environments for Aboriginal Research BC (NEAR BC): [www.nearbc.ca](http://www.nearbc.ca)

Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance  
[www.ius.uwinnipeg.ca/wira\\_overview.html](http://www.ius.uwinnipeg.ca/wira_overview.html)

### Publications:

*CIHR Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal People* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research):  
[www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/29134.html](http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/29134.html)

*Negotiating Research Relationships: A Guide for Communities* (Inuit Tapirit Kanatami):  
[www.itk.ca/sites/default/files/Negotiating-Research-Relationships-Community-Guide.pdf](http://www.itk.ca/sites/default/files/Negotiating-Research-Relationships-Community-Guide.pdf)

*Research Ethics Protocols and Guidelines* (First Nations Health Innovation Network):  
[www.fnehin.ca/site.php/research\\_guidelines/](http://www.fnehin.ca/site.php/research_guidelines/)

\* Additional resources are listed in the companion publication, *Questioning Research II, Homelessness Research and Aboriginal Communities (A guide for communities)*

Within this context a number of conclusions have emerged.

**1. Research must not only be done, it must also be seen to be done** – This principle, often articulated with reference to the justice system, could usefully be adapted by research organizations and funding bodies to emphasize the importance of transparency, congruency, and relevance in research projects addressing important community issues. It is often challenging to ensure that multiple partners are kept involved and informed as research processes develop, but it is a challenge that needs to be taken on if the research process is to be taken seriously by community members.

**2. Building trust based on mutual respect is essential** - There is very little trust in many Aboriginal communities about research processes, especially those that do not provide practical and timely solutions to complex and inter-related community issues such as homelessness. In order to gain the trust of community members, research processes need to take into account lived experience within the community and need to have concrete outcomes that directly address community issues.

**3. CBPR methods may provide useful tools to build networks and relationships** - Community based participatory research (CBPR) models provide one way of addressing these concerns. But paying attention to CBPR models leads into questions about how best to utilize these approaches to address Aboriginal community issues such as homelessness.

The CBPR approach is a lengthier, more costly and complicated process by its very nature. Researchers, community organizations, and, most importantly, funders must understand that more time and money needs to be invested at all stages for:

- Recruitment/outreach to community participants recognizing that it may take months or even years to develop an effective research question that addresses both community needs and research integrity
- Time to form relationships of trust and to address issues of power and control of the research process/outcomes
- Training of community-based researchers, allowances for addictions and mental health issues, extra time to reach the hard to reach populations, a slower analysis and report writing process
- Community/organizational support in disseminating research findings, as well as follow-up and reporting back to the community on potential actions and research results.

However, even if CPBR methods are employed in the best way possible there will be challenges. These include:

- Logistical issues such as requirements by funders and educational institutions, ethical review processes, publication schedules, etc. may mean that there is a long time between the conception and completion of research projects.
- CBPR is in itself costly, complex and not always appropriate for all situations.
- Research is only one of many considerations that are taken into account in the policy making process. Research recommendations are not often directly adopted by policy makers and decision makers. This means that research results, while useful and important in the long-run, may not have a direct and immediate impact on important issues.

**4. Recognize diversity including community strengths as well as challenges** – Too often labels such as “homeless,” “marginalized” and “vulnerable” mask the fact that every individual and community has unique strengths and experiences. People living may need to utilize creativity, skills and resourcefulness. The DTES group identified that a homeless Aboriginal person might have a university degree or technical certificate, and could have worked for years in the mainstream. This diversity and background may not find its way into the analysis of reports and may be concealed behind labels such as “Aboriginal homeless subjects.” Underlying issues may not be explored including discrimination, lack of participation in the research process, the socio-political context, colonialism’s legacy, or incomplete and undeveloped information gathering techniques.

**5. Avoid perpetuating stereotypes** - In Canada’s socio-political context where impoverished individuals are blamed for their poverty, and Aboriginal people are still healing from colonialism’s legacy, Aboriginal homelessness research can be full of hidden landmines. Misleading, discriminatory or judgmental reports can create more stigma and further stereotypes of the DTES, the homeless and of Aboriginal peoples.

**6. Implications for funders and academic institutions** - Many funders and academic institutions emphasize the importance of community-academic partnerships. While the principles of partnership and community involvement are gaining acceptance, there is an increasing need to develop effective strategies and techniques to ensure that individual research projects meets the needs of all partners.

Funding dollars need to reflect the added time for community involvement and organizational support that is an essential component of the development of community partnerships. Community agencies are already stretched in simply trying to provide necessary services. Agencies often view research projects as an added burden. If funders and institutions expect community agencies to partner, then they must be adequately fund them in order to encourage their participation and to make the process a more effective and respectful one.

In contrast to the development of partnerships on an individual basis, the concept of a research consortium that includes community, academic and other members represents another promising strategy. For example, the Winnipeg Inner City Research Alliance has supported a variety of research projects address Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal subject matter in the inner city area of Winnipeg.<sup>13</sup>

The insights and experiences of focus group members on which these conclusions are based serve as an important starting point to guide researchers, funders and community members towards the development of research that is methodologically sound, validates the experience of community members, and supports the development of effective and comprehensive solutions to problems such as homelessness.

13. Winnipeg Inner City Research Alliance (University of Winnipeg, Institute of Urban Studies), [ius.uwinnipeg.ca/wira\\_overview.html](http://ius.uwinnipeg.ca/wira_overview.html)

IN NOVEMBER, 2006 OVER 150 PEOPLE GATHERED AT THE VANCOUVER ABORIGINAL FRIENDSHIP CENTRE FOR THE SECOND BC/YUKON ABORIGINAL FORUM ON HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH.

THREE PUBLICATIONS HAVE BEEN PRODUCED AS A RESULT OF THE FORUM QUESTIONING RESEARCH I: FORUM REPORT (SECOND BC/YUKON ABORIGINAL FORUM ON HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH); QUESTIONING RESEARCH II: HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH AND ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES (A GUIDE FOR COMMUNITIES); AND QUESTIONING RESEARCH III: WHAT DO ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS SAY ABOUT HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH? (A GUIDE FOR RESEARCHERS).

THE FORUM WAS ORGANIZED BY THE NATIVE EDUCATION COLLEGE AND SPARC BC (SOCIAL PLANNING AND RESEARCH COUNCIL OF BC) IN PARTNERSHIP WITH AN ADVISORY COMMITTEE INCLUDING MEMBERS FROM ABORIGINAL RESEARCH ADVISORY SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE BC/YUKON REGIONAL HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH COMMITTEE.

