

The Second BC/Yukon Aboriginal Forum on Homelessness Research

The Forum brought together well over one hundred participants from across BC and the Yukon to discuss the future of research and action on Aboriginal homelessness, writes **Frances Tang-Graham**.

THE NATIVE EDUCATION CENTRE and SPARC BC organized the Second BC/Yukon Aboriginal Forum on Homelessness Research held at the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre on November 6, 2006. The conference brought together nearly 150 grass-roots activists, service providers, and funders from across B.C. and the Yukon to look at the opportunities and challenges involved in researching Aboriginal homelessness.

The participants explored many difficult questions. As expected, many participants voiced considerable mistrust of traditional research methods, which they saw as exploitative and unproductive. While some attendees agreed that community-based participatory methods offer some hope for the future, there was also a general call for “more action, less talk.” Others expressed concern that that research was still too indirect a way of tackling the problem of Aboriginal homelessness.

“It’s about action,” said Cheryl Matthew, Executive Director of the Centre for Native Policy and Research. “There’s no point in doing

research if we’re not going to do something about it.”

Janice Abbott, Executive Director of Atira Women’s Resource Society, argued that the money currently spent on research would have a greater impact if it was spent on new housing and programs. “One research project I’d be happily involved in is a research project that studied why politicians continue to deny the problems that exist in our communities,” she said.

Rod McCormick, an associate professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at UBC, was a little more optimistic. In a pre-forum keynote address, McCormick noted that increasing numbers of Aboriginal researchers are graduating from universities. “We’re seeing research being done by us instead of on us or with us. I think that’s a slow evolution.”

The statistical tools of research, such as the census, continue to fuel decision making at all levels—and this is not changing. “Without participating in it, you don’t have representation, and without representation you don’t have inclusion,” said John Makson, a policy analyst at the

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PHOTO FRANCES TANG-GRAHAM

Reporting Out. Rain Daniels facilitates a discussion during the closing plenary at the second BC/Yukon Aboriginal Forum on Homelessness Research.

First Nations Statistical Institute. He explained that if homeless populations were adequately captured in the census, more funding and programs would be allocated to address the issue. “Used in the right context, statistics can be a powerful tool for social change.”

As the one-day forum progressed it became apparent that a great deal of healing was needed to help redress the inter-generational trauma imposed by Canada’s colonial policies. Small group discussions focused on a variety of issues, including the impact of residential schools, youth, women, Northern communities, healing and wellness, and participatory research models.

Participants noted that a tendency exists to fixate on the negative aspects of Aboriginal life, without acknowledging the immense strength

and richness of Aboriginal culture. In addition, many attendees expressed the belief that homelessness could only be addressed through a long-term, collaborative process, one which could only be built on a foundation of trust.

The organizers hope that forum was only a first step in this process. Based on the conference goals and the information gathered at the event, a series of workshops and “kitchen table” discussions will help communities to follow up on a sustainable local level. Research guidebooks are also in development that will help communities take ownership of and regulate the research process. The intention of these steps is to ensure that research actually benefits communities and that knowledge does not lead to an imbalance of power. ■