Community Engaged Scholarship: A Path to New Solutions for Old Problems in Aboriginal Homelessness

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Introduction

We conclude with the argument that community engaged scholarship, working with populations facing social exclusion and discrimination, is the best way to find new solutions to the complex problem of homelessness. This is especially true of Aboriginal peoples who we will show face additional layers of complexity on the pathways into and out of homelessness. The description of Aboriginal peoples' experiences of homelessness in Calgary highlights that there is an even greater need to consider their particular historical experience in Canada when conducting research. We begin with a brief overview of the rates of homelessness among Aboriginal peoples in the city of Calgary and highlight some gender differences among the Aboriginal homeless. The next section places the Calgary Aboriginal population within the Alberta context. We discuss what we have learned through community based research about the pathways to urban Aboriginal homelessness in Calgary and the development of culturally safe services. In closing we propose that community engaged scholarship, which developed from working with oppressed peoples both respects Canadian ethical guidelines for research with Aboriginal peoples, is fundamental to Indigenous methodologies and will help ensure culturally competent recommendations.

Homelessness among Aboriginal Peoples in Calgary

Calgary, Alberta is a city located in Western Canada with about 1.2 million residents, a 3% annual growth rate, a median age of 36, and one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country at 4.9% (City of Calgary, 2012a). While Calgary has a relatively young population, many of whom make good salaries in the oil and gas and technology sectors, it has been estimated that 10% of Calgarians experience poverty, defined as "as a lack of resources and few opportunities to achieve a standard of living that allows full participation in the economic, social, cultural and political spheres of society" (City of Calgary, 2012b, p. 4). Furthermore, Aboriginal peoples are overrepresented among the poor in Calgary:

> While employment rates for Aboriginal people have improved, the gap in employment rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people has not changed much in 20 years and the wage gap is growing, even for those with relatively high levels of education. In Calgary, there is an overrepresentation of Aboriginal people living in poverty (Pruegger, Cook, Richter-Salomons, 2009, p.2).

According to the 2006 census, only 2% of the Calgary population is Aboriginal, and over half (56%) of these identify as Métis, about 40% as First Nations, while only 1% were Inuit, and 3% reported multiple identities (Statistics Canada, 2010).

Aboriginal peoples are vastly over-represented among the homeless on the streets in Calgary. In one street count done of the homeless done in Calgary in 2008, 15% were identified as Aboriginal (Stroick, Hubac, & Richter-Salamons, 2008). In another study during the same

period, however, the data collected in 2008-2009 to triage the homeless for housing according to their health needs revealed that 24% identified as Aboriginal. There were reasons to suspect, however, that even this was an underestimate (Thurston, Soo, Turner, 2013). In the most recent count of homeless persons in Calgary, 21% of those counted were Aboriginal, and a full 38% of those found rough sleeping were Aboriginal (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2012). This highlights the challenges of obtaining accurate estimates of the numbers of Aboriginal homeless peoples, among other research challenges (Thurston, Oelke, Turner, 2013).

Gender Differences in Urban Aboriginal Homelessness

Gendered roles and relationships shape the experiences of Aboriginal women in both the reasons for homelessness and the experiences. Aboriginal women are also overrepresented among the homeless served by the domestic violence sector, which is consistent with the population level rates reported. The impact of domestic and other interpersonal violence (IPV) on homelessness rates is greater for Aboriginal people simply because the rates of violence are greater among Aboriginal peoples. Research conducted over thirty years suggested that Alberta has had one of the highest rates of violence against women in Canada. One national study found that Alberta had the second highest rate of violence against women with 58% of the female population over the age of 18 reporting at least one form of IPV (Statistics Canada. 1993). Another national study confirmed Alberta's high rate of IPV: the General Social Survey (GSS) revealed that 10% of women in Alberta reported being victims of spousal assault within the past five years, making it the highest rate in the country. The national average was 7%. (Statistics Canada, 1999). Aboriginal women were more likely to report the most serious forms of abuse, and more serious injuries (Statistics Canada, 2005). Another report highlighted the serious nature of the violence: Alberta had one of the highest rates of female homicide over three decades (FPTMRSW, 2002).

The Brenda Strafford Centre, a second stage shelter for women fleeing domestic violence opened in Calgary in 1996 with 24 apartments. Women were overwhelmingly referred to the centre by first stage, or emergency shelters. Over the next ten years the Centre housed 432 women with their children. About 29% of the women were Aboriginal. Over that period the Centre did not have a specific policy on cultural safety that would attract Aboriginal women, although the mission did include provision of a safe community for women and children (Thurston, 2006). It is also likely that this is an underestimate of the rates of Aboriginal women seeking service within the domestic violence sector. Aboriginal women experience barriers to personal empowerment and to services, including the impacts of colonization and racism that are linked to higher rates of alcohol and substance abuse, and disruption of family systems due to residential school abuse (Perrault & Proulx, 2000; Brownridge, 2003). The complicated dynamics of racism and discrimination, as well as cultural values and beliefs, frequently make it difficult for Aboriginal women to disclose abuse to both formal services (i.e., police, shelters, and health care professionals) and informal supports (i.e., family and relatives). Further, many Aboriginal women living in northern and remote communities are faced with the additional challenge of finding services specific to Aboriginal culture (Thomlinson, Erickson & Cook, 2000).

In Calgary, therefore, Aboriginal women may also be overrepresented among the street homeless. Shelters for women leaving domestic violence consistently have waiting lists. One study did find that they there were more females among the Aboriginal street homeless than the non-Aboriginal homeless, and they were more likely to work in the sex trade (Thurston, Soo,

Turner, 2013). Aboriginal women who are homeless may also face some degree of geographic isolation from support networks that may or may not be present in the city. They might also fear loss of confidentiality in urban locations as support workers may in some way be connected to the community they come from and potentially may inadvertently share the circumstances of their clients' personal situation.

The Social Context of Aboriginal Homelessness

When Canada was beginning to be populated by English and French settlers, Aboriginal peoples had occupied the land for many centuries. They had sophisticated societies within nations of peoples, systems of government, traditional territorial land use treaties, peace alliances, different world views, their own religious systems, art, languages, and sustainable systems for food procurement. In Alberta there is cultural diversity among the Aboriginal people (Alberta Government, 2013). Three treaties, Treaties 6, 7, and 8, were signed by the Crown with the Aboriginal people of Alberta. Treaty 6 was signed in 1876 and includes 16 of the 45 First Nations; Treaty 7, signed in 1877 includes 5 First Nations; and Treaty 8, signed in 1899 includes 24 First Nations. There are also 140 reserves in Alberta scattered from the most northern border to the most southern (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2014). The Métis were also provided with eight "Settlements" in Alberta, unlike most Canadian provinces. There are about 189 thousand people who identify as Aboriginal in Alberta. By contrast there are 17 cities, 108 towns, and 93 villages of non-Aboriginal people comprising a population of about 3.8 million compared to 68 thousand "Alberta: Indian Register Population" (Government of Alberta, 2013, p. 11). Thus, about 120 thousand, or 64% of Aboriginal people do not live on First Nation lands, a trend that is national in scope (Environics Institute, 2012). The First Nations (reserves) range in population size from 0 to 8,000, the zero indicating that everyone has left that community and the latter, the Blood Tribe, being one of the largest First Nations in Canada and located in Southern Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2013).

Pathways to Urban Aboriginal Homelessness

There is overwhelming evidence in the published literature of long standing structural inequities that are embedded in Alberta society and experienced in Aboriginal communities. The multigenerational poverty, multigenerational trauma, mass removal of children from homes and families, physical and emotional responses to colonialism, apartheid cultural genocide policies, and dispossession of lands and property (Daiski, 2007; Guthrie Valaskakis, 2005; Kirmayer, & Guthrie Valaskakis, 2009) all play a role in both reserve and urban Aboriginal homelessness.

In Canada, the history of government intervention involving Aboriginal children can be mapped into three main policy periods: the residential schools period; the 'Sixties Scoop' period (from the 1960s to the early 1980s); and the post-Sixties Scoop period in which there has been greater Aboriginal control of Aboriginal child services (Bennett et al., 2005; Mandell et al., 2007). In the 1880's the federal government adopted a policy of forcing Aboriginal children to attend residential schools. In the 'Sixties Scoop' large numbers of Aboriginal children were apprehended from their parents and moved to towns and cities to be raised by non-Aboriginal foster and/or adoptive parents. The pro-assimilatory approach of the first two periods led to harmful effects that continue today to impact Aboriginal individuals, families, and communities.

Alberta had the highest number of residential schools in the country (n=25, TRC, 2014) which accounts in part for the higher prevalence of domestic violence and homelessness. In Alberta it is still true that a disproportionate number of children in the child welfare systems are Aboriginal comprising 64% of the children in care (Alberta Child Intervention Review Panel, 2010). The reasons for this overrepresentation are complex, and rooted in the legacy of colonization (Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). The greater Aboriginal control of present-day services for Aboriginal children has been a meaningful step towards healing the harms created by the first two policy periods; however, many challenges still face the Aboriginal agencies involved in child welfare work. Adapting western models of child welfare to Aboriginal communities is just one of the challenges. Promoting child health in a setting where educational opportunities are limited and under resourced is another.

In a study of the pathways from rural to urban homelessness Thurston, Milaney, Turner and Coupal (2013) asked people what had led them to become one of the homeless people in Calgary. The twelve participants were from six Alberta reserves, one Métis settlement, and two reserves in Saskatchewan, and ages ranged from 39 to 68 years. Seven of the twelve talked about having addiction problems. Their pathways to homelessness revealed life stories of loss, separation from family and community, involvement in the child welfare and justice systems, and unemployment mixed with a drive for a better life and hope that the answer was still ahead. Moving to Calgary, where the housing costs were high was done with hopefulness that employment opportunities would be available and the rest could be worked out. The research found, however, that the pathway to urban homeless was mapped by economic, educational, political, and social inequities on the reserves that were repeated in the cities. The pathways began with what are considered historical factors, colonization, the residential schools, and discriminatory child welfare policies, but the impacts were still felt in present days. It is true that anyone who is traumatized in childhood and suffering a loss of identity also may end up homeless, but Aboriginal peoples additionally face racism from landlords, lack of respect for their traditions and culture, economic and employment discrimination, and cultural alienation.

In moving to the city Aboriginal people are looking for a place to belong, to start over (Turner, et al., 2010). The literature suggests that cultural healing and developing a strong identity can restore balance for Aboriginal peoples and provide the capacity to address other challenges, such as, addictions, mental health and family relationships. “Cultural continuity” aids in maintaining an “imagined future” (Chandler & Lalonde, 2009, p. 221; Kirmayer, Tait, Simpson, 2009).

Ironically, seeking for and developing a strong cultural identity can be psychologically healing, but also reinforce ‘otherness’ because of the reactions of others. This can occur during the process of cultural reconnection if the approach to teaching and learning is not sympathetic to diversity and if other agendas (e.g., personal recognition or payment, retaliation, lateral violence) are implicit. Anderson (2000) writes:

> Absurdly, many of us, young and old, have now experienced shame or embarrassment because we are not conversant in the various traditions and ceremonies that have only recently come back to our communities (p. 27).

It is more likely, however, that the Aboriginal individual will experience stereotyping and racism from non-Aboriginals. A friend, for instance, has described how her Métis background is overlooked and after the Aboriginal Relations meeting at her company she is exposed to hallway denigrations of “those people.”

Racism and stereotyping are fed by media and other cultural reinforcements that one group is the "other" *compared* to the 'majority', 'mainstream', or 'white male'. In this chapter we have presented statistics comparing Aboriginal (one diverse group of peoples) to non-Aboriginal peoples (another very diverse group that contains a small proportion of people with Aboriginal background who either do not know it or do not wish to reveal it) because we know that the comparison will make sense to people and possibly help them form a more informed opinion of Aboriginal homelessness. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine whether that is a justifiable decision when another result is to continue to position Aboriginal people as the 'other'.

Safe Places to Heal

In the western provinces there are few organizations serving Aboriginal people that are governed by Aboriginal peoples, few Aboriginal staff, and few examples of best practices to help Aboriginal people exit homelessness (Thurston, Oelke, Turner, 2013). There are jurisdictional disputes over which level of government is responsible for the provision of services to Aboriginal peoples in Canada and the issue of homelessness has only gained prominence in social policy in the last decade. It is not surprising, therefore, that few models exist of urban services for the homeless which are governed by Aboriginal organizations. Within the homeless sector, however, there has been resistance to acknowledging that Aboriginal peoples might need some other programs than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Thurston, Soo, Turner, 2013). Directors of programs have been known to respond something like, "It's not my job" when asked if they were going to introduce cultural safety for Aboriginal peoples into their organization in the homeless serving sector.

Opportunities for innovation in a competitive funding environment are limited; thus, structural factors besides colonialist history and racism impact on the lack of safe place for Aboriginal peoples who are homeless to find cultural reconnection and a sense of belonging. It is, however, possible to create cultural competence in existing programs if the will exists as demonstrated by Calgary Alpha House Society, a harm reduction service for the homeless in Calgary. After connecting with the homeless outreach project at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary, the staff decided to move forward building cultural competencies and were supported in this decision by the board of directors (Bird, Thurston, Oelke, Turner, Christiansen, 2013). Oelke, Thurston and Arthur (2013) describe cultural competencies along a continuum: cultural awareness (getting to know something about another culture); cultural sensitivity (exploring one's own culture and the interaction with other cultures while accepting difference); cultural competence (building on awareness with knowledge and skills that ensure good outcomes in cross-cultural encounters); cultural safety (incorporating collaboration in the creation of culturally safe environments that reduce inequities); and cultural advocacy (promoting social justice). We propose, therefore, that a best practice in research about Aboriginal homelessness is community engaged scholarship.

Community Engaged Scholarship and Solutions

Community engaged scholarship, from an academic perspective, has its roots in the work of people who were confronting structural inequalities in society. Foundational work came from

lower income countries where political oppression was too obvious to be ignored. Working with people who were oppressed by their governments and other forces outside of their immediate control, researchers came to believe that the model of a distant and supposedly objective researcher placing a community under his or her scientific gaze was counterproductive in many cases. Treating the community as a source of valid knowledge, as an equal in the research relationship became the goal of a new model (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008).

Community engaged scholarship is defined in a national eight university project in which the University of Calgary is a participant as encompassing:

> …intellectual and creative activities that generate, validate, synthesize and apply knowledge through partnerships with people and organizations outside of the academy (http://cescholarship.ca). It includes "teaching, discovery, integration, application and engagement that involves the scholar (e.g., faculty member, student) in a mutually beneficial partnership with the community and has the following characteristics: clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective presentation, reflective critique, rigor and peer-review (CES, 2013).

The tri-council policy on research with First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada states that "reciprocity – the obligation to give something back in return for gifts received" is a core value shared by Aboriginal peoples in Canada "which they advance as the necessary basis for relationships that can benefit both the Aboriginal and research communities" (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC, 2010, p. 105). The First Nations Information Governance Centre also affirms this principle for research on First Nations peoples. A principle of research is that "communities must be involved as full partners" (p.4) (FNIGC, 2011), a principle that is implemented in the First Nations regional Health Survey. How the tri-council policy, the principles supported by FNIGC, and the roles of Ethics Research Board (formal ethics review processes at universities across Canada) will interface remains to be seen. AFNIGC does not address the Métis, the majority of Aboriginal peoples in Alberta, and in urban settings it is often difficult to identify organizations that could or will claim to represent all Aboriginal peoples. Nevertheless, a model of research has been singled out and in terms of abating urban Aboriginal homelessness, we agree that community engaged scholarship is a strong model that stands up to ethical scrutiny and is being applied with academic rigor. While the foundations of CES were developed originally by non-Aboriginal academics and community partners, the emergence of Indigenous methodologies has strengthened CES as a methodology and improved the work with Aboriginal populations (Kovach, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith,1999).

Community engaged scholarship is also positioned to address the complexities of a problem with many faces. As described in this chapter, that characterizes the problem of urban Aboriginal homelessness very well. A central question for any researchers on urban Aboriginal homelessness then is how the proposed project can benefit the Aboriginal homeless. This can only be answered in the context of knowledge of the local policy systems, structural barriers to change, and for non-Aboriginals in alliance with Aboriginal peoples. Learning to be an ally depends on talking to Aboriginal people themselves, and getting information depends on how trustworthy one is perceived to be. In sum, the effectiveness of community engaged scholarship depends in part on relationships that are built over time and time is often the least of resources that academics possess, especially those competing for promotion and tenure.

Urban research and practice with Aboriginal peoples present challenges, but ending homelessness depends on the success of strategies and methods used to address the challenges. We propose that if research is going to help solve problems of Aboriginal homelessness then it must be rooted in close relationships with Aboriginal peoples who can help ensure cultural competence in the methods and the interpretation of results and culturally appropriate solutions.

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