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Our Home Is Native Land: Teachings, Perspectives, and Experiences of Indigenous Houselessness

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous Peoples are the fastest growing and youngest populations in Canada, yet face persistent housing crises across both urban and reserve settings. While Indigenous Peoples often move to cities in search of employment and education, they are overrepresented among the homeless population. This article, summarizing results from the author's doctoral dissertation, provides a review of housing transitions needs and barriers from the experiences and perspectives of 13 Indigenous Elders/traditional knowledge keepers and youth, employing a narrative inquiry methodology and traditional knowledges interpretive framework. The intersection of Indigenous culture, community, housing transition, supports, and barriers is presented, highlighting the narrative voices, experiences, and perspectives of community members and Elders. Implications for service providers, policy, and future directions are included in this work.

RÉSUMÉ

Au Canada, les peuples autochtones sont le groupe démographique le plus jeune ainsi que celui qui croît le plus vite. En même temps, ceux-ci font face à des crises de logement récurrentes tant dans les villes que dans les réserves. Bien que les autochtones déménagent souvent dans les villes à la recherche d'emplois et d'éducation, ils sont surreprésentés parmi les sans-abris. Cet article, résumant les résultats de la thèse de doctorat de l'auteure, passe en revue les besoins et obstacles relatifs à la transition d'un logement à un autre. Pour ce faire, il recourt à une méthodologie d'enquête narrative et un cadre interprétatif des savoirs traditionnels afin de recueillir les expériences et perspectives de treize personnes autochtones, y compris des aînés, des gardiens du savoir traditionnel et des jeunes. L'article porte sur l'intersection parmi les autochtones entre la culture, la communauté, la transition entre logements, et les appuis et défis pour trouver un logement. Ce faisant, il souligne les voix narratives, les expériences et les perspectives des aînés ainsi que d'autres membres de la communauté. Il traite aussi des implications de cette recherche pour les fournisseurs de services, la formulation de politiques et les directions à prendre pour l'avenir.

Keywords / Mots clés : Indigenous houselessness, Indigenous traditional knowledge, Elder perspectives, youth narratives, Indigenous culture, Indigenous life transitions / sans-abris autochtones, savoir traditionnel autochtone, perspectives des aînés, narrations des jeunes, culture autochtone, transitions de vie autochtones

INTRODUCTION

To say that the Indigenous housing crisis is a modern problem is incorrect; Indigenous Peoples have had a housing crisis for 530 years. Displacement and forced relocation, the construction of reserve systems, and genocide are but a brief list of strategies that have displaced Indigenous Peoples from traditional territories, stolen land, and attacked cultural identity, despite millennia of flourishing ecological stewardship on Turtle Island (Absolon, 2010; Eshet, 2015; Patrick, 2014). Current statistics on on-reserve housing found four times the rate of overcrowding and three times the need for major repairs than the national average (Statistics Canada, 2016). Such conditions are inextricably linked to physical illnesses and economic instability in families (Belanger**,** Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012; Patrick, 2014; Whitbeck, Crawford, & Hartshorn, 2012).

This article will explore Indigenous houselessness and urban transitions from Indigenous perspectives across multisystemic levels, from the very notion of *housing* and *home* to the multifold ramifications of wellbeing and security, by highlighting the voices of Indigenous Elders, traditional knowledge keepers, and youth interviewed. To gather these stories, a narrative oral storytelling method was employed to honour traditions of knowledge transmission; participants were recruited virtually over the COVID-19 pandemic, through community partnership and connective outreach efforts (Gabriel, 2021). Just as Indigenous houseless is produced by the multisystemic impact of history, societal structures, systemic inequities, and enduring barriers to Indigenous success, these narratives will explore the multidimensional (e.g., individual, communal, societal, and cultural) factors that surround urban housing transitions. In total, the narratives of four Indigenous Elders and knowledge keepers, alongside nine Indigenous youth in the Toronto community, were included.

In search of advancing education and sustainable employment, ever-growing waves of Indigenous Peoples seek shelter in cities across Canada. This pattern of urban migration has been documented since the 1950s; from 2006 to 2016, the number of Indigenous People living in an urban centre increased by 59.7 percent (Statistics Canada, 2016). With the majority of the Indigenous population under the age of 24, with a growth rate four times that of their non-Indigenous counterparts, Indigenous Peoples are the fastest growing population in Canada, and these trends of urban migration will only continue (Patrick, 2014; Whitbeck et al., 2012). However, on arrival to cities, a perfect storm of interpersonal ruptures, high housing costs, and systemic racism contribute to barriers in secure housing and stable employment. Despite high hopes for stability, research has documented that for many Indigenous arrivals, survival lies along pathways of transitional housing, substance abuse, and involvement in the sex trade (Braveheart-Jordan & DeBruyn, 1995; Hodgson, 1990; Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000; Menzies, 2008; Phillips, 1999; Waldram, 1997; Ward, 2008).

Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately represented among the insecurely housed across almost all urban centres in Canada (see Table 1) (Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, 2014; Maes, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2016).

Table 1: Indigenous overrepresentation across Canadian urban centres

City	% Indigenous population	% Visibly homeless
Vancouver	2.2%	39%
Edmonton	5%	51–65%
Winnipeg	4.9%	65.9%
Yellowknife	90–95%	
Montréal	0.7%	16%
Toronto	0.5%	15%

These staggeringly high rates only make sense in the wake and impacts of colonization. This crucial contextualization is strongly maintained by Indigenous researchers (Maes, 2011; Menzies, 2008; Oelke, Thursdon, & Turner, 2016; Patrick, 2014). Thistle (2017) describes how systemic racism and colonial factors are expressed through mental health, housing, and life transition outcomes; however, these become personalized to those navigating street transitions, as opposed to contextualized to a colonial society:

> The observable manifestations of intergenerational trauma in Indigenous Peoples, such as intemperance, addiction and street-engaged poverty, are incorrectly assumed to be causes of homelessness in popular and worldwide blame-the-victim discourses. Obscured behind these discourses are the historical processes and narrative prejudices practiced by the Canadian state and settler society that have produced Indigenous homelessness. Discourse about these processes disappears into myths about flawed Indigenous individuals: mental "illness," substance abuse, recidivism, delinquency, and other myths. (p. 7)

Such pathways become most strongly related to colonization when considering consistent houselessness trends in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (Peters & Christensen, 2016). Indigenous relatives in Australia have noted that Indigenous houselessness is severely challenged by community and cultural connection, which are integral aspects of wellness from cultural perspectives (Browne-Yung, Ziersch, Baum, & Gallaher, 2016; Dockery, 2010). Historically rooted and persistently present, genocide's gargantuan wounds are witnessed in the wellbeing of communities, health and housing statistics, and, most crucially, in the voices of Indigenous Peoples themselves. Researchers, clinicians, and communities have strived to map out the impact, which has been best described in personal effects as intergenerational trauma, extending and adding multidimensional understandings to modern diagnostic conceptualizations of traumatology (Duran, 2006).

OUR HOME IS NATIVE LAND: INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES

While Western-based notions define *housing* and *home* synonymously, interviewed Elders began their discussions by recentering the idea of home for Indigenous Peoples:

> Creation is our home, we get everything from the earth and from creation. So for us, it's not seen as homelessness, it's a complete reverse. We get everything from the earth and from creation. … When I think of homelessness now, it's sad to see somebody sleeping on the street, but in that same notion they're the closest to creation. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 184)

Traditional Indigenous teachings know that the land is our living, dynamic mother. She provides for the health and wellbeing of her children so long as people lovingly steward to ensure balance. In living closely with the land, flora, and fauna, Indigenous Peoples have traditionally been spiritually connected with the land, a connection that ensured survival, and fostered ceremony, culture, and language**,** "in order to survive that we had to move where the resources were … [we're] a very transient people, so we've always had to move" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 435). Traditional shelter was made to be mobile to better allow movement to follow seasonal change and migration of herds and resources; these shelters were constructed with spirit and intentionality, something markedly missing from modern housing**,**

> I think that's the biggest part that's missing, traditionally in our dwellings we did [ceremony] at every stage … our spirituality played such a part in it … that type of connection to our home is really missing in that sense. A lot of times today, we'll smudge our homes, but that's usually as far as we go nowadays. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 185)

Because permanent, structured housing is a predominantly Western construct, houselessness too is "a foreign concept. It's a colonial concept. Because how we see this and how we understand is the Earth is the mother and we're her children" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 184). While shelter should be provided in outreach supports, Elders detailed that those experiencing housing loss hold a unique relationship to land, "they are living with creation. They have a whole other relationship to creation than we do" (Gabriel, 2021, p. 436). In considering what is commonly described as Indigenous homelessness, the term *houselessness* is much more appropriate; Indigenous Peoples are home on Turtle Island. However, since it is land sovereignty and safe access to housing that has been interfered with by colonial governments, this land relationship is a result of various intersecting housing crises. This distinction is crucial, as *houselessness* helps us to recenter the onus of impact to colonial structures and their persistent presence.

URBAN PUSH

While Elders described traditional patterns of seasonal migrations, Elders in this study noted that movement to cities is due to resource exploitation of their home communities, and subsequent changes to traditional avenues of employment (Ommer & Coasts Under Stress Research Project, 2007). One Elder described the structural and systemic impact that surrounds urban movement:

> [N]ow when our children go to high school, they're dumped in the local cities and local towns. In those local towns have been what I call Woodtick towns. They're towns that were established next to a reservation, so that they could eat off of the Indians in those communities, for monetary resources, labour, and all those other things that take our people outside of our community to be part of that community, whatever that is up there. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 187)

This Elder shared that on arrival to cities, Indigenous Peoples first sought safety in community**,** "When I got into the city, we hit the places where Aboriginals would meet and exchange wisdoms on how to survive in a city. Where to survive, where's the cheapest place, where to make money, where to get money" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 188). Youth in this study described feeling initially intimidated by the city due to the lack of overall Indigenous cultural representation in services and society. Some noted that seeking Indigenous service providers offered familiarity, security, and representation for support in establishing stability. One youth described how cities themselves are Western constructs that require Indigenous youth to learn specific skills:

> The lack of skills that they need to survive out there. The city is not built for us and we're not made to be living in the city. It comes from them [settlers]. That's why they're so good at living in the city, because they've lived in cities for generations, for centuries. It's in their genealogy to live in a city. For Native people, we don't know how to live in a city because it's not designed for us. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 190)

Elders also described that Indigenous youth entering the city struggle to learn the needed life skills to ensure secure transitions, such as financial budgeting, cooking, and debt management. These skills can improve youths' sense of esteem and autonomy in survival. However, urban immersion often disconnects Indigenous youth from traditional identity and spiritual practices,

> The other part is the adjustment from living on a reserve and living in a remote [community] and then coming into the city centre. There's so much against you. Availability of that fast life and shiny things out there including drugs and alcohol. I'm not saying it's not readily available on the reserve, but it just seems to be a medication for when we're living in the city centres for the time that we're there. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 408)

Participants identified that many factors, both societal and structural, impacted transitions to houselessness. As described by a youth participant, "You've got to look at the journey of how they got there. Nobody just walks into a shelter" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 191). On a municipal level, high housing costs and erasure of subsidized housing (i.e., cost of housing, building removal, minimal rent subsidy) limited the available options for low-income families. One youth described that while expensive housing was continually in development, there were shrinking opportunities for housing that low-income families can afford: "I see too many condos going up and I see too many [people with] not enough housing [—all] going up quicker, and I see more and more homeless people. Even children [are] on the street" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 192). Another Indigenous youth described how previously affordable units were demolished, restricting available options, "I remember … when the Regent Park Buildings started getting [torn] down, a lot of them had nowhere to go because of the long waitlists at the Pan Am Buildings, and they had to turn to living in shelters" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 192).

The exorbitant costs of living in Toronto were described as being unforgiving for families or those struggling financially. The high cost of living requires all funds to go towards rent or food. Soon, financial savings were depleted, which left them vulnerable to housing loss if any additional costs arose. One youth explained, "If I was in market rent, I wouldn't have a single penny left to do anything to take care of them, to buy them clothes, to feed them properly. Do you understand how hard it is? They don't understand" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 465). Another youth elaborated on the financial strain of survival for those on social assistance and housing in Toronto: "How are you going to tell someone to save money to get a place when obviously it's next to impossible to get a place because you need credit? You need a reference. You needed things for over 2500, they gave you a box" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 486).

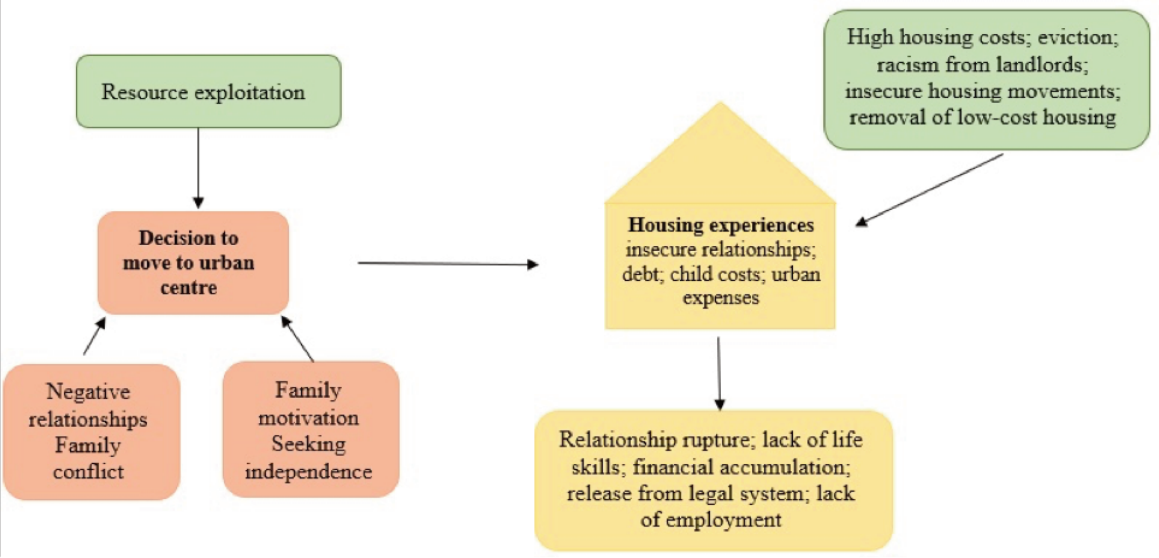
The urban housing market was determined to be unsustainable for many. Market rent was too expensive for employment opportunities, or was insecure due to any number of factors that risked tenant removal. One Elder described how housing intersected with anti-Indigenous racism to create continued insecurity with catastrophic consequences,

> At any given time you can be asked to leave your apartment because somebody's selling the building, or you could be thrown out because somebody made a complaint, or you can not have the apartment because of racism, and any other thing that [may] rear its ugly head when we're looking for places to live in the city. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 192)

Another Elder described the arrested dreams of intelligent and resourceful Indigenous youth being met with housing barriers on arrival, "How many others are on the streets that come down from their

reserves to Toronto to get their education or employment and find themselves in the same situation, which snowballs into being a homeless person?" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 425). The personal, societal, and systemic factors that contributed to urban push and decision-making are included in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Reserve migration factors & urban housing experiences



Notes. This graphic is colour coded to reflect the various intersections and systems involved in homeless and housing loss. Those factors outlined include societal systems (green), personal/familial factors (red), and factors directly related to housing security (yellow).

STREETS ARE SAFER

Both youth and Elders in this study described houseless youth seeking shelters for temporary support, but quickly moving to street living which was seen as a safer alternative**,**

> … they're not going to go to these heavy drug induced shelters where there's a lot of violence that occurs. There's violence in youth shelters, but there's a lot more support in youth shelters than there is in an adult shelter. So, a lot of them resort [to] going straight to the street, and they either lose their housing because nobody can get a hold of them or – so this as I said, the transition between their lives and through adult housing is night and day. (Gabriel, 2021, p. 193)

Another Elder described supporting a youth that was navigating academic work while houseless**,**

> That's what I see goes on with some of the homeless people in Toronto, [—] … the fact that they're not comfortable in cities, in any of the shelters that are provided for them. So they'd rather stay on the street. He was determined to stay here. This is downtown Toronto. He was determined to stay and do his schooling and live on the streets as opposed to living on a shelter that was very unsafe for him. And he's not alone. There's a lot of people out there like that. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 194)

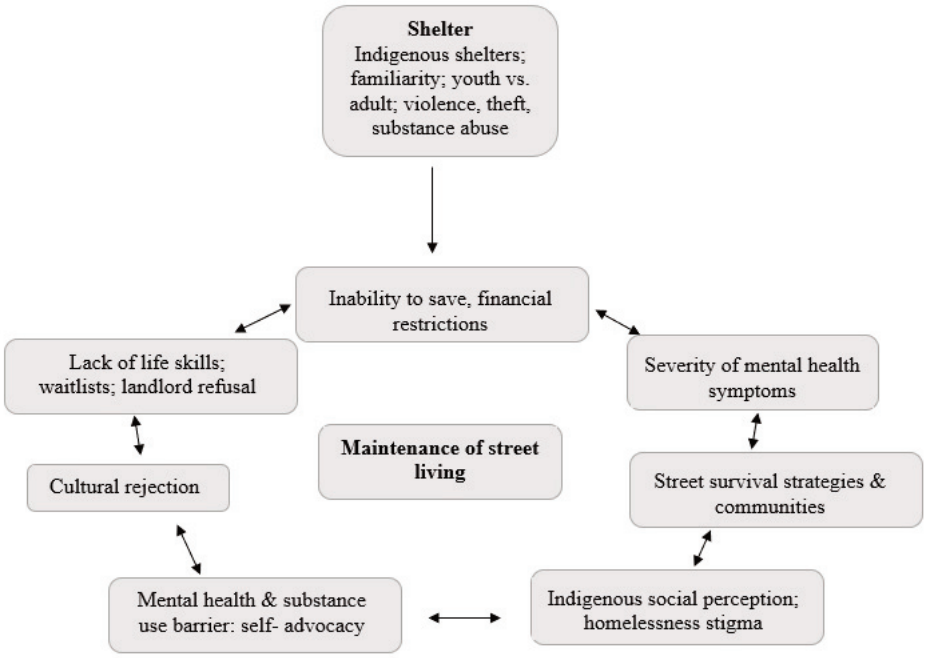
She noted meaningfully supporting houseless community members required engagement, ceremony, and support and acceptance of the client's decision to choose the safest pathway for them

at that stage of their journey. Acceptance and support, however, can be found in street-involved communities as well, which can incur more significant risks that later threaten safe housing transitions. As described by another Elder,

> People try and find belonging. And I know for many people that get involved in maybe gangs, or unfortunately sometimes use sex trafficking, they can be seeking belonging and finding that belonging can be a bit dangerous, or it can have risks involved. And especially with the LGBTQ and two-spirited communities, it sounds like there's actually the rejection, which is that absence of belonging, like seeking belonging and not having it available or having a lot of hostility. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 196)

These same avenues, in search of belonging, can pose additional risks in later transitions out of houselessness. These pursuits either risk physical harm or further violence. These experiences and reflections are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Shelter, street transitions, and street living



Identity impact

Elders in this study reflected on their own experiences of housing insecurity, and the impact it had on their sense of self and wellbeing. One Elder described the importance of such lifelong reflection to better understand present impacts, "It's allowing us to look back over our path and where we are today and why those things still affect us" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 200). This Elder described his experiences of inadequate housing and the innate comparison with that of non-Indigenous peers,

> I think the biggest thing about moving from place to place is not having that sense of belonging, and not having that sense of ownership, and not having that self-esteem, of watching your next-door neighbour get into their brand-new car and drive away and know that they owned a house and that … they have inside facilities … It's always a constant

> looking at the outside world through, I guess, tainted lens, that I would never be able to afford that. My family would never be able to afford to live that way. And I think that gets to be ingrained after a while and then we start to accept that. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 200)

Over time, and with repetition, this Elder described how such persistent housing insecurity, paired with non-Indigenous housing dichotomies, internalized messages of lower self-worth and identity. This directly impacted housing choices even upon achieving job security**,** "the self-esteem only allowed me to live in those second-rate or third-rate housings, because … that was all we deserved. And I don't think I did it consciously but it was subconscious. Like I said, those kinds of ways are ingrained from childhood" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 200). Elders in this study described how, through ceremony and healing, a divide began to emerge between the physical structure of housing and the innate worth of the self that lived there. While the shelter itself could be a house or tarp, it was the inside that made it a home,

> although this house is decrepit and it's unsafe, it's still our home and it flourishes from the inside out. It's a safe place for others to come and be here and talk. And, you know, that's the flourishing that I'm talking about and I want to — I want to embrace. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 201)

While Elders reflected on the longitudinal impact of housing on identity, and recentering home to focus on relationships, these collected stories also highlighted how best to create loving, supportive relationships with Indigenous houseless members navigating vulnerable transitions.

SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS HOUSELESS PEOPLE

Care for those navigating housing loss was primarily rooted in three approaches: deep acceptance, connection to community, and holistic support. Research has shown that Indigenous Peoples have a persistent distrust of Western-based services due to experiences of racism and lack of cultural perspective, understanding, and worldview in their systems of care (Benoit, Carroll, & Chaudhry, 2003; Cochran, 1997; Deane, Morrissette, Bousquet, & Bruyere, 2004; Hudson & Taylor-Henley, 2001; Marshall & Stewart, 2004; Menzies, 2001; Stewart, 2008). A push for culture as treatment is increasingly recommended (Brady, 1995; Dumont & National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, 2014; Rowan, Poole, & Shea, 2014), which this research unequivocally supports. Elders and Indigenous communities have the methods, medicines, and tools to meet all dimensions of health and wellbeing in a balanced way (Absolon, 2010). In this study, Indigenous workers and knowledge keepers described what core approaches, rooted in Indigenous cultural perspectives, best support interventions and care for those navigating housing loss.

Acceptance

While some cultural teachings have specified protocols and timeframes surrounding substance use and attending ceremonies, those Elders and community youth in this study championed the importance of non-exclusionary outreach and acceptance. All Elders interviewed for this project unanimously supported client involvement in ceremonies, regardless of substance history. Community members described how abstinence-based protocols were akin to rejection, which conflicted with traditional Indigenous teachings of non-judgment, acceptance, and love. One Elder described the importance of this approach**,**

> I think one of the reasons why we're so successful at it is because we don't insert protocol into ceremony. I couldn't care less if you used last night, as long as your intention of going into that lodge is pure. And sincere. And that's all that matters. You know, there's too much imposed protocol on our people as it is from the settlers. We shouldn't be doing it ourselves. Who cares that you're wearing a pair of slacks into a ceremony area. Creator doesn't care. Why should I care? (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 211)

Youth also described how damaging cultural rejection can be to clients, and how it further disconnects them from the support needed for healing: "You can't go to a powwow, they kick you out because you had a few drinks … maybe the person needs to be there at the powwow, need the support of the community. Canceling people out doesn't solve the problem" (Gabriel, 2021, p. 482). Sweat lodge ceremonies, which offer profound physiological benefits, were described by participants as an important culturally based method of supporting detoxification and healing from substance abuse. However, prohibitory protocols based on recent substance use can further compound shame and painful cultural rejection, contributing to increasingly heavy emotional burdens. The enforcement of cultural protocols was seen as an additional barrier that further isolated and disconnected Indigenous Peoples from ceremonies, Elder connection, and community spheres, which in turn could have disastrous ramifications on identity and meaningful supports at a crucial point of vulnerability in life transitions.

Connection to community

Elders that had worked with street-involved youth described that in the absence of culturally rooted and safe community connection, Indigenous youth will seek belonging where they can. Those youth separated from communities and families, such as those navigating foster care, experienced pathways that lead to street transitions:

> We're finding that with CAS [Children's Aid Societies] that those kids have a very hard time once they leave the system to survive on their own. … meaning that the skills to survive as young adults, a lot of times they get in the justice system and sadly then go into the homeless system, you know, in a lot of their struggles. (Gabriel, 2021, p. 439)

As noted previously, the core need for belonging and safety was a foundational wound that led some Indigenous youth to gang involvement or sex work. One youth described how community connection is a protective factor when navigating traumas or discord in family homes:

> I think it gives people … the sense of identity and home almost when they might not have a home. It's grounding … they can come back there and everything's the same. They still have that father figure or friend figure, support system of who they are and they can feel connected somewhere. … getting to experience who you are and see yourself in other people, because you're all from the same sort of thing. I think that that can be really powerful and save a lot of kids from a lot of trauma. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 509)

Community and cultural engagement proved to offer more than just positive social benefit, but also promoted a positive sense of self-worth, supported Indigenous cultural identity, fostered connection to peers, and helped connect deeply with Elders and community figures. Community-based ceremony, such as the Rites of Passage ceremony, helped celebrate stages of development with community members:

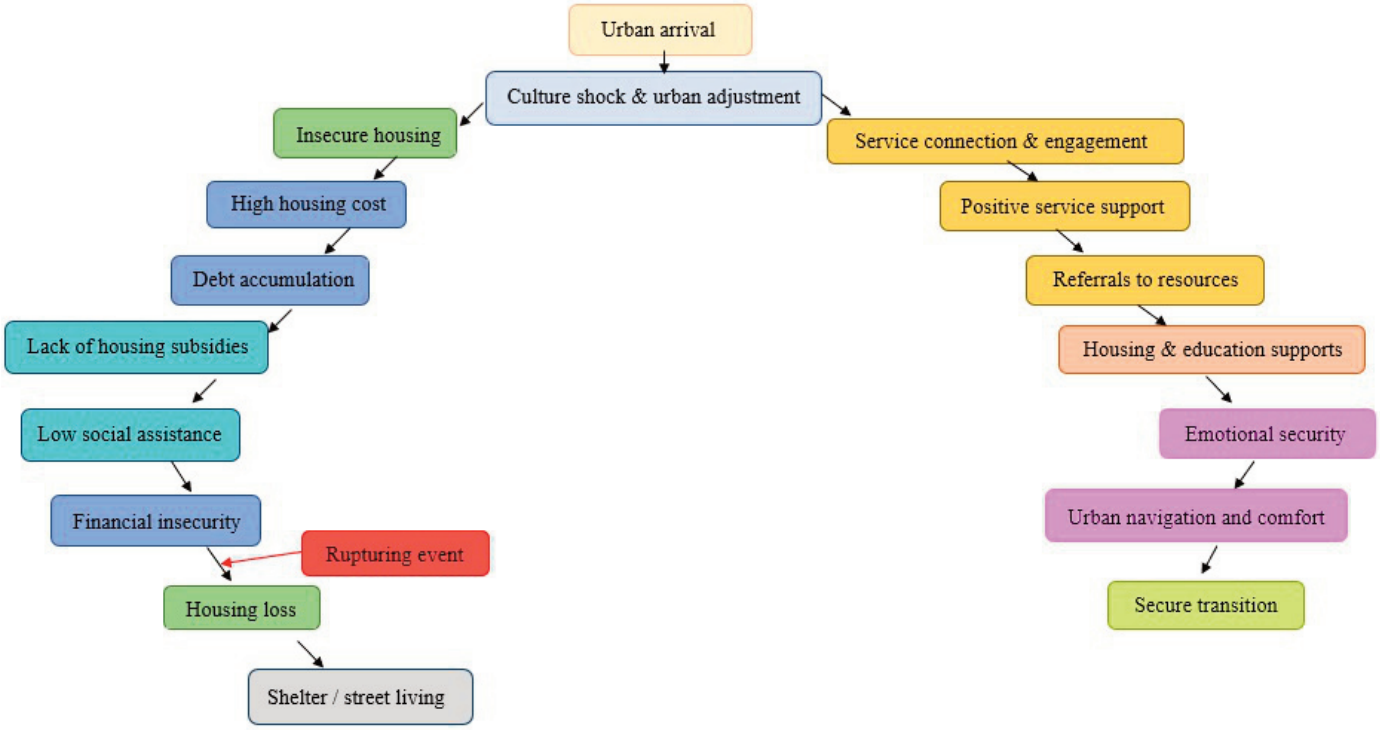
> It was a ceremony that provided our young people, whether they're girl or boy, that they would have that acceptance into community. … these lodges would attend that ceremony, because the idea is that they're no longer a young person anymore, they're now an adult, so they're going into a new lodge … they're entering a new stage of life, and it's that whole acceptance that allows them to transition through life. And they get that acknowledgement and celebration *that our people are looking for.* (Gabriel, 2021, p. 206, emphasis added)

Holistic supports

Just as Indigenous perspectives of health appreciates a holistic view, so too does supporting youth navigating transitions to housing and stability (Absolon, 2010). To exemplify the importance of holistic resource supports in housing transitions, one youth interviewed in this project described how prior debt, with no income and way of repayment, created a financial impasse. She was unable to return to school to receive training or access meaningful educational opportunities. When she was connected with a scholarship-promoted program, educational support workers offered positive interpersonal and financial resources:

> I can't say the countless times that they've helped with the food parts in the middle of the month when I have no money and there's hardly any food left in the fridge. And they give me a hundred-dollar food card. That is a lifesaver … It feeds me and my whole family for another week until OW [Ontario Works] comes out. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 463)

Figure 3: Life transition comparisons of interviewed urban youth



Notes: On the left is a summary of factors that contributed to street living for one youth, including societal and personal factors. The right illustrates a youth's description of how the benefit of service intervention from an Indigenous community organizer supported a secure transition while completing studies.

The most supportive workers expressed personal understanding of youth experiences—understanding of the difficulty of life transitions and supportive personal connection. These personable and empathic approaches were invaluable supports through an intensely vulnerable period. Flexibility in academic opportunities, such as scholarship programs, were strongly recommended by those youth caught in the cycles of debt accumulation, housing loss, and financial detriment when struggling to meet daily needs and debt repayment. Referrals from service providers offered a positive security network that offered accessible skill building and access to resources, which promoted not only physical and financial supports, but also the secure, emotional supports of community and worker connection. Of those participants that described successful and secure housing on arrival to cities described how connection to Indigenous community service providers was key early in their arrival. The comparison between such transitions is summarized and presented in Figure 3.

The aforementioned participant described how access to service and community supports were invaluable to beneficial and reliable skill building, but personal supports were required:

> With those programs being available, free, and accessible, is really what made me the smart person that I am now. Being able to critically think myself out of hard situations. To be able to not give up. … We really need programs where we can teach the women that it's necessarily not their fault for being where they are today, but there is something that you can do about it. You can fight back, and you can be worthy of this world. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 461)

BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS

While the above criteria outlined youth and Elder perspectives on successful strengths for housing navigation, they also identified key barriers, both interpersonal and societal, alongside recommendations for challenging these blockades.

Financial barriers

Financial barriers were present in a multitude of formats. On an individual level, participants described financial literacy challenges and the frightful consequence to lacking knowledge of debt: "Is there classes that I could learn about finances or classes where I can learn about credit? … I never knew how important these things were when I was a teenager, when I should have known these things" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 465). As mentioned, one youth described how dire financial straits contributed to an ongoing, cyclical rut that restricted repayment or saving: "Every single penny that I got, I couldn't put it towards paying back anything. I needed every single penny. Paying off debt or doing anything like that was way out of the question for me" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 465). Similarly, another youth described how any form of social assistance goes entirely towards basic survival, "They either rely on ODSP [Ontario Disability Support Program] or OW [Ontario Works], which is like 800 to 400 dollars a month. How are they going to save that when they need to meet the needs right now for the month?" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 486).

The sole solution for such high rates of debt was identified as community-based educational supports, such as scholarship-based or free programming for skill building, or community centres where youth could connect with peers, access food, find resource, and gain marketable skills toward em-

ployment. Considering societal barriers such as high housing cost and systemic racism, Indigenous community-based supports were able to help alleviate posed barriers that individuals could not navigate alone: "Or if I get another scholarship program for an even better course, then, that's the only way where I'm going to be moving up in life" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 465).

As noted, rampantly escalating costs of living and lack of available subsidized rent were seen as disastrous forces that expedited individuals' push to street living. One youth cited how the structure of the city's economy itself was a challenge to lower income families,

> It's not because of us; it's this economy and the way that everything is and how rigged this system is. It's not fair for a lot of people, especially the people that are living in poverty. It just never ends well for us. So we really need somebody to give these women a chance to just become successful. Don't we all have that right? I think about that all the time. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 471)

Additional societal barriers identified by Elders included the broad, systemic reach of racism towards Indigenous Peoples, and its presence in casual societal disregard for, and systemic desensitization and numbing towards Indigenous houselessness. Elders noted that the high rates of Indigenous houselessness and further propagation of stereotypes, ignorance, and misinformation of colonization contributed to a societal disregard for the wellbeing of Indigenous and racialized peoples, "'Look at those drunken Indians on the street.' How many times have we heard that one? 'Those drugged-up Indians. They're panhandling,' or whatever. But they never stop to think that they could be in the same position" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 430).

The poison of judgment

Just as acceptance and non-judgment was promoted to be a powerful support for navigating houselessness in Indigenous communities, judgment was a profound and impactful detriment of housing and service workers. One youth interviewed described the perils of workers' negative judgments towards houseless clients. She described how the initial stages of housing loss began with absolutely no supports in place:

> It was very hard trying to get the necessary help that I needed, because I didn't know where to start. I had no resources; I had no help; I had no workers; I had nothing. No one. I had to really do a lot of independent research on my own, even though I wasn't in shelter. They're supposed to be doing all the helping and they're supposed to get me back on track and to avoid homelessness—because I've never been homeless before—to intervene before it's something that continues to happen. Because I'm not stable; I don't have the things that I should have at my age. So, if I [hadn't taken it] upon myself to get the right help that I needed, I probably would have ended up staying in the shelter longer than I should have. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 229)

While this youth described her tremendous motivation and resourcefulness in seeking supports toward housing, she described that motivation alone cannot surmount all barriers and blockades to stability. Reliance on a housing worker became precarious, as the totality of client health and well-being relied on a worker who may have inadequate knowledge of resources, insufficient approaches, or lack true understanding to client pathways to housing transitions. As housing loss includes the

dearth of total resources and supports, clients rely on workers for not only humane compassion for navigations to houselessness, but knowledge of referrals and resources that could be accessed. She also described the impact that housing transitions have on mental health: "Everyone that is going through that same situation, is going through the same things: depression, anxiety, any type of different mental health disorder … this is not something that we can necessarily control" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 474). In this case, the worker's lack of understanding to their client's story, unique needs, and circumstances resulted in the client feeling judged and unsupported—yet another profound barrier in a seemingly insurmountable transition:

> All she kept saying is, "Housing is a 14-years-long waiting list, I can't see you getting housing or your children back." She's supposed to be someone who's supporting families? No. That was really wrong, and I actually, I told her about herself. I told her, "You automatically judged me. Your job is supposed to be non-biased. You're not supposed to just stand there and judge people because of a little picture of what you have." (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 467)

She emphasized the importance of non-judgmental support workers**:** "We don't know why this person has ended up with these children … Whatever the case may be, we can never just judge. I feel like that's what a lot of people do. They automatically just judge us" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 470). Akin to poison, then, worker judgment of clients, and ignorance to their histories, spreads to the quality of their care: referrals for further resource support may be lacking or inappropriate; personalized, meaningful referrals to appropriate resources may remain unknown; and what hope clients hold for finding safety and security could be dashed entirely.

Recommendations for care and service provision

In better understanding the specific needs and experiences of houseless clients, more personalized supports and more applicable resources could be provided. Key recommendations for service workers include

- Training to support mental health and wellness (i.e., grounding and crisis de-escalation training);
- Cultural safety training and education on the impacts of stigma and racism on Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous community members;
- Wide knowledge of resources available to better support clients (Gabriel, 2021).

Worker perspective and approach

Workers that employed non-judgment in their approach and understood that houselessness is symptomatic of systemic issues were also noted as important: "We didn't ask to end up where we are today. Everything has led to something. At least we're here and we're trying to make the difference" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 470). Supportive workers were recommended to employ a holistic approach in supporting their clients, as well as engaging with clients with personal investment:

> She's really had the girls' back … that is the type of woman that loves her job. You can have any person doing this program, but it's really up to them to kind of give it their all and to understand the position of these women. (Gabriel, 2021, p. 470)

Skills

In providing care for street-involved youth and community members, both youth and Elders described the crucial importance of trust-building and mutual respect. Trust and respect are foundational cornerstones of trauma-informed care and service delivery, a framework that should be mandated for street-involved care workers as, if experiences of trauma did not exist prior to housing loss, houselessness itself has been identified in the literature as inherently traumatic (Goodman et al., 1991). One Elder promoted the importance of having trust-building and crisis skills: "For myself, it was always to figure out how to navigate through that anger and how to build that trust, so I would definitely suggest some really good crisis intervention training" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 231).

Service boundaries

Age restrictions for youth services (i.e., terminating availability of programming at age 24) were noted to be profoundly frustrating for clients seeking transition support only to be met with additional barriers. It is illogical to assume that housing loss and street needs occur within a specified time range or developmental period; however, age-related gaps exist with regard to youth and adult-based services. One youth described, "There's violence in youth shelters, but there's a lot more support in youth shelters than there is in an adult shelter. … the transition between their lives and through adult housing is night and day" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 205). Of note, while interviews were conducted with Indigenous youth, the recommendations for supports, skills, and approaches are encouraged for community members of all ages.

Evaluation

One Elder noted the structure of Indigenous-based service providers were not well understood by Western-based funding bodies. She described that Western-based evaluation methods were compromised by the inability to capture the efficacy and scope of culturally based, ceremony-guided Indigenous care services that best meet the community's needs. Additional formats were then restricted and challenged by agencies requiring Western-based evaluations to justify spending:

> We've seen the loss of our services and sadly, they've seen more Western models get adopted in. That's the sad thing in that notion, but at the same time nobody could really prove the benefit of having a drop-in, in that sense and making sure you had staff to support it … looking at the impacts and the benefits and the evaluation components are always going to be hard to prove. (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 239)

Just as Indigenous culturally based approaches were important in community care, these same models are important to implement in the evaluation of such resources and services. Indigenous-based service evaluation for Indigenous-based services was seen as the best method of determining not only service efficacy, but the reflection of cultural values and the components of community care that are unique to the Indigenous community.

Policies and society

The high cost of living, the failure of preventative supports, and the barriers in service provision continue to compound instability, "They're really turning Toronto into a business district, and I feel like they're pushing all families who have lower income out. They're pushing them out into rural areas, giving them no choice but to leave Toronto because it's so expensive" (in Gabriel, 2021,

p. 470). This push creates further obstacles for community members striving to maintain positive supports and services that are located in the urban centre. Without more moderate housing and subsidized rental units available, community members become increasingly limited in establishing security, which further risks housing loss**,** "I know a lot of single moms who are paying market rent and who are suffering every single day. How can you keep up with a $2000 rent bill, and then utilities?" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 471). However, existing interventions are in place not to prevent homelessness, but to address a crisis once it has occurred**,** "Basically, you really have to be in sort of a crisis for anybody to even look at you. I feel like there should be a system where we stop the crisis part" (in Gabriel, 2021, p. 471). An increase in dedicated, subsidized housing was recommended to assist economic stability.

Elders and youth alike supported the need for Indigenous policy to be rooted in holistic and spiritual knowledges, "I think can absolutely offer insight and a better policy to be made, if someone has that will within" (Gabriel, 2021, p. 238). Western policies in service delivery, evaluation, and housing situations continue to displace and impact Indigenous housing and connection to our spiritual home. Community members agreed that only cultural integration and inclusion of Indigenous Peoples into policy, housing, and health service domains can better answer the needs of Indigenous Peoples and communities, and to alleviate the ongoing conflict of cultures, worldviews, and perspectives. To bridge this gap, youth promoted the inclusion of social services, health, and housing policymakers into Indigenous ceremonies and practices, "having that understanding with them, having that personal appreciation, I think can do wonders then for the people who this policy's affecting" (Gabriel, 2021, p. 238). In personally attending ceremonies and cultural safety training, non-Indigenous policymakers have the potential to gain insights and shared understanding into the value of such cultural practices. Policymakers were encouraged to listen to Elders and Indigenous Peoples to understand their needs, "Well you have to listen now. You have to learn. … know that when you're listening and you want to help you're going to make a lot of mistakes, right? And that's OK. And just apologize. That's truth and reconciliation" (Gabriel, 2021, p. 238).

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The consequences of ongoing colonization affect every aspect of Indigenous wellbeing, including the traumatizing experience of houselessness. Changes at the systemic and service levels are needed to better prevent and interrupt the houselessness of Indigenous Peoples. In order to fully and effectually address Indigenous houselessness, a holistic, multisystemic approach is required. Personal interventions are insufficient in challenging a political, societal, structural, racial, and historical epidemic. Creating meaningful interventions and supports will be no small feat, requiring gargantuan effort.

Statistical trends demonstrate that the Indigenous population is only continuing to grow; the existent systems and structures are bound to fail them. There appears to be no lack of barriers to Indigenous success. Barriers Indigenous Peoples experience include social stigma, stereotypes, miseducation in Western-based school systems, economic exploitation causing subsequent health detriments, and lack of appropriate, representative care. Each avenue of living is rife with great challenges. Each obstacle increases the pressure on communities to fill in the gaps that Western

societal structures have created. Including and collaboration with Indigenous Peoples on policy would tremendously benefit the communities whose voices are echoed in this work.

As stated, more Indigenous babies are arriving, like precious medicine bundles, to a world that will need their gifts. What if, on arrival, we could greet these little ones with a world that is more inclusive, more integrative, and better understanding of their cultures? What if they grew up in a world where policy and service providers better understood their needs?

What if, instead of houselessness, we could welcome them home?

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