

## Housing Challenges and Barriers of Indigenous Youth with Involvement in the Criminal Justice System in the Greater Edmonton Area

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Chris Hay  
Executive Director  
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# Executive Summary

This modest study has resulted in some significant preliminary insights into the challenges facing Indigenous youth in the Edmonton area who have had exposure to the legal system and have experienced homelessness at key points in their lives. The research team faced a series of challenges in carrying out the project as first envisioned. Issues of privacy and security of the youth, cultural differences in the perception of “homelessness” by Indigenous youth and the different responses to homelessness by males and females all affected the process whereby information was gathered.

As the literature review had already suggested, the relationship between homelessness and criminal behaviour is a complex and interactive one with no clear dynamic that one predisposes in the other. It is clear from the interviews with the youth that there is a strong relationship between the family environments where unstable conditions or criminal activity of the adults influences the behaviour of the youth. Leaving the family home and seeking alternative places to sleep and eat and often lacking the resources to survive necessitates behaviours that can lead to criminal activity.

Service providers who worked with Indigenous youth also noted that safe and healthy family environments at an early age were crucial for the avoidance of unstable and dangerous behaviours that often led to criminal activities by youth. There are too few social resources available to assist Indigenous families under stress when needed.

Although the youth did not make it explicit, the social workers indicated that Indigenous youth faced discrimination on an ongoing basis. From potential landlords and employers to numerous police checks, Indigenous youth face negative attitudes that reinforce their feelings of alienation and hostility to the greater community.

It is also significant that many of the youth were unaware, or only vaguely aware, of the community resources that already exist to which they could have turned. But equally disturbing was the fact that those who did know about shelters and agencies often expressed feelings of insecurity and danger from others or that they lacked any understanding of Indigenous realities and so led to their deciding to avoid these resources. There appear to be more resources available to homeless males than females, with the latter somewhat limited to agencies focused on victims of domestic or sexual violence.

As is true for many homeless youth, Indigenous youth also grapple with addictions, mental health factors and histories of sexual abuse in their lives. Their feelings of cultural alienation from many of the community resources only exacerbates the challenges towards developing a stable and productive lifestyle.

We are convinced that appropriate and measured interventions to address these factors at an early age will be crucial in preventing the need or inclinations to criminal behaviour.

## Introduction:

The John Howard Society of Alberta (JHSA) has conducted research into crime, its causes and consequences for more than 60 years. We are particularly concerned with the high, and ever growing, number of Indigenous people in our provincial prison system or under community supervisions. Given that the official population of Alberta in 2017 was 3,978,145 (Stats Canada 2017a) and that 6.5% of that population was Indigenous (Stats Canada 2017b), then it is very disturbing that 42% of our incarcerated population is Indigenous and 27% of those under supervision.

These very uneven ratios are mirrored by the proportion of Indigenous homeless youth across the province. 19% of the homeless population in 2018 were under the age of 24. Of that number, 38% of these were Indigenous (Turner Strategies, 2018). Given the overall demographic percentage of Indigenous people in the Province, this figure is again proportionately too high.

The JHSA firmly believes that criminal behaviours are “nurtured” through a complex and interrelated myriad of social and environmental factors over which a young person has little control or even understanding. Dysfunctional families, poverty, malnutrition, abuse, homelessness and addictions are just some of the primary negative that can undoubtedly influence how youths interact with the world around them. In addition to these factors, we believe that Indigenous youth are confronted with discrimination and racism by the greater community in which they are a part.

Yet to date little research has been devoted to the complex subject of the interrelatedness between criminal involvement and homelessness as it relates to Indigenous youth. Some of the recent literature examines the risk factors for Indigenous people to commit crimes but not from a homelessness perspective (Bonta, LaPrairie, & Wallace -Capretta, 1997) (Grekul & Sanderson, 2011) (Miller, Donahue, Este, & Hofer, 2004). Does homelessness presuppose criminal activity in any meaningful way? Or does the other lead to homelessness? We believe that a better understanding of this relationship is important if society is to make a positive impact on the issue of Indigenous homelessness and Indigenous overrepresentation in the criminal justice system.

Our research project focused on the use of qualitative interviews with Indigenous youth as well as with youth service providers who work with Indigenous youth in the Edmonton area. We sought to better understand the perspective of the youth as to whether they considered themselves homeless and why (or why not) and if they felt there any connection between their illegal behaviours and their degree of being homelessness.

# Literature Review

## Introduction

Homelessness and criminality share a complicated relationship. Being homeless is often a high-risk lifestyle where criminal behaviour is seen as a means for survival. (e.g. a person who is housing challenged might commit fare evasion to get from one place to another). Criminal behaviour can have a negative impact on housing for those involved. (e.g. a person who is incarcerated might lose government assistance which pays for their rent). So, which came first? Does criminality cause homelessness? Does homelessness cause criminality. The answer is not so simple. Many persons engaging in crime are not homeless, and not all homeless people must engage in crime to survive. However, there is a clear overlap between the two. The relationship becomes even more complicated for the Indigenous persons of Canada.

Homelessness and criminality share many of the same risk factors, which include socioeconomic status, mental health challenges, addictions, and trauma. In the context of the Indigenous people of Canada, all these risk factors must also be examined under the lens of colonialism and intergenerational trauma, as it has greatly contributed to the listed risk factors.

## Provincial Profile

In the census administered by the Government of Canada in 2016, Alberta had a population of 3,978,145 (Statistics Canada, 2017a), with 6.5% being Indigenous. First Nations persons represented 3.4%, Metis persons represented 2.9%, and Inuk persons represented for 0.1% of the provincial population. The Indigenous community is also growing at a rate of more than double that of non-Indigenous persons, with the most significant growth coming from the Metis community (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Indigenous people are also younger than non-Indigenous Canadians, where the average age of Indigenous persons is 32.1 compared to the median age of non-Indigenous persons of 40.9. Indigenous families tend to begin earlier and have more children.

The 2016 census surveyed Canadians to find those of 'Aboriginal Identity,' which is defined as a person who identified with the Aboriginal people of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017a), including individuals who identify with being First Nations, Métis, Inuk (Inuit), or those who are Registered Indians or Treaty Indians under the Indian Act, or those who are band members. It is also important to consider that, as a result of disenfranchisement, many persons are of Indigenous identity but are unable to prove it legally.

## Profile of Indigenous Homelessness

The concept of homelessness is challenging to define. Varying sources will define homelessness differently. For the purpose of this piece, homelessness will include those living on the streets, those staying in shelters, those living in their vehicles, those moving into transitional housing, those that are couch surfing, and those that are under-housed. Based on this inclusion, the degree of homelessness experienced by the Indigenous community is hard to quantify accurately. While approximate counts can be performed on the streets or in community shelters, it does not always account for those that are couch surfing or under-housed sufficiently.

Despite the challenges in quantifying homelessness faced within the Indigenous community, some approximate values provide insight into possible homelessness. Indigenous persons accounted for 26% of the homeless population of Alberta in 2018 (Turner Strategies, 2018). Persons under the age of 24 accounted for 19% of the homeless population. Using the studies, administrative data from shelters and related housing options, 40% of the homeless persons under the age of 18 and 33% of the persons age 18-24 were Indigenous. When combining all youth under 25 years of age, 38% self-identified as Indigenous. Indigenous persons were most severely overrepresented in the homeless count in the youth age ranges. Considering Indigenous persons make approximately 7% of the population of Alberta, these figures are staggering and demonstrate a clear area of need.

It is also important to consider what it means to be homeless within the context of the Indigenous community. For instance, in some communities, it is common practice to live with a variety of relatives for shorter stays and is not self-defined as being homeless (Muir & Bohr, 2014). Because this practice does not fit with the western idea of having a home, does this mean those involved are homeless? Cultural practices and self-identification are paramount when considering the issue of Indigenous homelessness (Thistle, 2017). It is not for not-Indigenous persons to say what the Indigenous homeless experience is. Research on Indigenous homelessness must first examine what it means to Indigenous people to have a home.

### **Profile of Indigenous Criminality**

Quantifying the crimes committed by Indigenous persons and comparing them to non-Indigenous offenders is a difficult process. Many crimes in Canada go unreported for a variety of reasons, and it is therefore impossible to accurately quantify crime. However, using correctional data can shed some light on the issue. Alberta has an approximate population of 3,978,145 (Statistics Canada, 2017a), with 6.5% being Indigenous. Despite accounting for only 6.5% of the provincial population, Indigenous persons account for roughly 42% of the population in provincial correctional centers (Malakieh, 2018a), and 27% of the population under community supervision. While incarceration rates are the only representative of a portion of the problem, it certainly demonstrates a picture of Indigenous involvement in criminal behaviour. Prisons are also worth noting as a factor that contributes to Indigenous criminality.

Prisons are now being called the “New Residential Schools” as they are tools to isolate and assimilate Indigenous community members (Macdonald, 2016). While culturally sensitive incarceration exists, it is available at a rate highly outstripped by demand (Zinger, 2018).

Additionally, federal healing lodges only cater to inmates that are of lower security classification (Correctional Services Canada, 2014). Unfortunately, Indigenous inmates also experience a bias where they are more likely to be given a higher security classification than non-Indigenous inmates. The current Canadian correctional system places Indigenous persons at a disadvantage, which results in poorer rehabilitation outcomes. The lack of rehabilitation for Indigenous offenders is contributing to Indigenous criminality and therefore the homelessness of Indigenous persons.

Additionally, the substantial incarceration of Indigenous persons suggests poorer outcomes for their children. Children who have had a parent incarcerated are more likely to experience negative outcomes (Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, & Mincy, 2009). This includes incarceration, lower socioeconomic status, residential instability and homelessness.

## **Factors Contributing to Indigenous Homelessness and Criminality**

### **Colonialism**

The legacy of residential schools is perhaps the most infamous in Canadian history. Residential schools served as an institution of isolation and cultural destruction. “Two primary objectives of the residential school system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions, and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption that Indigenous cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal” (Indigenous Foundations, 2018). Unspeakable horrors and trauma were endured by persons and communities that had their children removed and sent to residential schools and by the persons who were forced to live in residential schools.

Additionally, the trauma of residential schools extends to the decedents of residential school survivors and is known as the intergenerational trauma of residential schools. The intergenerational trauma of residential schools has contributed either directly or indirectly to much of the current suffering of Indigenous persons (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, The intergenerational effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the concept of historical trauma, 2014). This suffering includes (but is not limited to) the destruction of culture, poorer mental and physical health, poverty and lower socioeconomic status, and overrepresentation in jails and prisons.

### **Socioeconomic Status**

Indigenous persons experience poverty at a much higher rate than non-Indigenous persons. This is likely related to the fact that Indigenous persons have overall lower amounts of completed education and lower employment rates (Statistics Canada, 2015). Lower employment rates may also be influenced by the overall poorer self-reported health of Indigenous persons, isolation from employment opportunities, and societal and structural racism endured by Indigenous persons. Crime is seen either as an opportunity to gain money and status or as a survival strategy for those living in poverty (Edelman, 2018). Those living in poverty experience increased the risk of victimization (Weinrath, 2000) – another risk factor for criminal behaviour. Considering Indigenous persons experience poverty at a higher rate than non-Indigenous persons, it is, therefore, reasonable that they engage in more criminal behaviour and are more prone to experiencing residential struggles or homelessness.

## **Mental Health**

Mental health challenges are perhaps one of the first things that come to mind when contemplating homelessness, and it is certainly a major factor relating to criminality. Many studies have linked mental health concerns with criminal behaviours (Ferrazzi & Krupa, 2016) (Michalski, 2017). Considering Indigenous persons self-report that their mental health is poor much more frequently than non-Indigenous persons (Statistics Canada, 2015), it is reasonable to consider their overall poor mental health as a factor contributing to their involvement in criminal behaviour. Many homeless persons surveyed have reported mental health challenges, with as many as 8% of homeless Albertans identifying mental health problems as their primary reason for being homeless in 2018 (Turner Strategies, 2018). However, even more homeless persons identified mental health challenges as being a factor.

## **Addictions**

There is a strong relationship between addictions and criminal behaviour (Grant, 2009). Addictions have been linked to the colonial trauma experienced by Indigenous persons (Poundmakers Lodge Treatment Centres 1973, n.d.). Individuals who are managing or treating their addictions are less likely to engage in crimes – both violent and non-violent (Russolillo, Moniruzzaman, McCandless, Patterson, & Somers, 2018). Considering Indigenous persons report higher rates of addictions than non-Indigenous persons (Statistics Canada, 2015), addictions experienced by Indigenous persons can be considered a factor that contributes to Indigenous criminality. Additionally, the majority of these addictive substances (excluding alcohol and marijuana) are illegal or being used illegally.

In the 2018 survey of homeless Albertans, addictions were identified as the primary reason causing homelessness, with 25% of respondents reporting it was the primary cause of their homelessness (Turner Strategies, 2018). Addictions also have a significant impact on homelessness. Addictions are often extremely expensive (Canadian Centre for Substance Use and Addiction, 2019). When a person is experiencing addictions, they might be more prone to funding their addictions than paying for accommodation. Addictions also have a serious impact on persons who are living in homelessness. Many shelters and transitional housing solutions do not allow persons to have or use intoxicants while residing in them. This produces a significant barrier for those who are dealing with addictions and experiencing homelessness to find somewhere safe to reside.

## **Trauma**

Finally, it is essential to acknowledge the role trauma has played in all of the above-listed factors. Trauma has been linked to addictions, mental health challenges, and lower socioeconomic status (Erwin, Newman, McMackin, Morrissey, & Kaloupek, 2000) (Browne, 1993). Considering the trauma experienced by Indigenous persons as a result of colonial efforts like residential schools and the Sixties Scoop have caused substantial trauma and intergenerational trauma among the Indigenous community (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, The intergenerational effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the concept of historical trauma, 2014) (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2011) (Eliasa, et al., 2012).

## **Importance of Indigenous Methods**

Research on Indigenous communities has been historically one-sided. Indigenous persons are often unable to benefit from the research that is conducted on them as they have little input on the study design or how the information found will be used. For research on Indigenous communities to be impactful, it must be meaningful to the community studied. Efforts to create meaningful research would include the consultation of Elders, and Indigenous community leaders ensure cultural sensitivity and areas of important, reciprocity to the community studied and allowing the Indigenous community itself to establish what is important in a study. Some efforts that have already been made have used the community-based research methodology in their approach (Community-Based Research Canada, 2019). For the purposes of this research, the Indigenous definitions of “home” must be considered, as well as the implications of living on stolen land (Thistle, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

There is a significant relationship between homelessness and criminality. Living in homelessness often forces those involved to engage in criminal behavior as a survival method. Alternatively, criminal behaviour can also have the ultimate consequence of homelessness. A solution for one issue cannot be achieved without addressing the other. Aiding homeless Indigenous youth is a challenge all the more difficult as a result of the colonial and intergenerational trauma suffered by the Indigenous community. While there is no one way that can remedy the situation, for any initiative to have meaning and impact within the community it must cater to the needs and culture of Indigenous persons.

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## Methodology

As was also the objective for our previous report (incarcerated seniors), it was understood that in order to understand the actual experiences of the Indigenous youths who have or are experiencing homelessness and have had contact with criminal justice system, it would be ideal to interview the youth themselves. But this approach again faced similar challenges, not the least of which are privacy issues and the feasibility of even making direct contact with the youth as some would have been under the age of 18 and therefore be individuals within the vulnerable sector.

The methodology considered the following key challenges:

1. It was extremely challenging to identify Indigenous youth who met the two criteria of homelessness and some exposure to the justice system and who were willing to be interviewed for the purposes of this study. Access to the youth was facilitated by their service providers or through the assistance of an Indigenous case worker who introduced the interviewer to a number of youth at a youth drop in centre.
2. While other studies have indicated that Indigenous youth make up a significant proportion of the youth homeless population in Edmonton and Alberta, we were unable to interview as many youth as we had first anticipated. This is owing to two reasons: Indigenous youth are wary of being asked about any criminal activity in which they may have been involved and of engaging in a process of survey with which they are not comfortable (even though the interviewer is Metis). As a result, there were less opportunities to have interviews with Indigenous youth than anticipated. Additionally, Indigenous youth were found to be more wary of the traditional shelters available in Edmonton. They cited both concerns around issues of personal safety and a feeling of cultural alienation exemplified through not being understood by the service providers.

The approach that was adopted for this project consisted of the following elements:

1. Identify local community agencies that work with Indigenous youth;
2. Develop a standardized survey questionnaire for caseworkers/staff and Indigenous youth;
3. Have the questionnaire and interview selection process approved by the University of Alberta Ethics Committee;
4. Interview agency staff and case workers who work with Indigenous youth using the questionnaire;
5. Identify and interview a number of willing parole officers working with Indigenous youth;
6. Approach those local agencies that work with Indigenous youth to request permission for interview access to some youth;
7. Attempt to organize a traditional circle with some Indigenous youth to hear their story.

The agencies and service providers interviewed were:

The Loft

Mustard Seed

NOVA

Howard House (Edmonton John Howard Society)

Corrections Alberta Probation Officer

The youth that were interviewed were drawn from:

RESTART (1 youth)

NOVA (1 youth)

Howard House (Edmonton John Howard Society) (3 youth)

Bent Arrow (2 youth)

Hope Mission Drop in Centre (7 youth)

## Results

### Demographic Information:

Number of Youth Participants: 14

- Fourteen youths identified as being male, 0 identified as female, and 0 identified as being non-binary. 0 of the participating youths identified as being a member of the LGBTQ2+ community.
- Over half the youths reported some variety of learning disability, including FASD, OCD, and ADHD. Additionally, many of the youths who identified they did not have a learning disability later disclosed that they suffered from OCD or ADHD. While they admitted to being diagnosed with these conditions, they did not identify themselves as having a learning disability.
- The majority of youths indicated that they were suffering or had suffered from mental health challenges, specifically depression, anxiety, and difficulties managing anger.
- Overwhelmingly, the majority of youth reported some addictions. These addictions included nicotine and tobacco products, alcohol marijuana, prescription medication (not prescribed by their doctor), methamphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy and MDMA, and heroin.
- Seven youths outright said they had experienced homelessness or some kind of housing challenges, but six later described circumstances of being homeless or under-housed without identifying as such. One youth reported no housing challenges but was still reliant on daytime drop-in centers. Every youth that participated in the study was either attending programming as a result of judicial sentencing, in voluntary programming, or reliant on supportive organizations like drop-in shelters.
  - The types of homelessness or housing challenges experienced by the youths are as follows: couch surfing, staying with friends, staying with relatives instead of their parents, attending shelters, visiting drop-in centers to have somewhere to go during the day, staying awake all night outside

Number of Service Provider Participants: 11

Participants roles varied as youth workers, community based residential facility staff, shelter staff, and program coordinators

### Information from Youth:

Frequent Responses:

- When defining what it is to have a home, Indigenous youth said that they thought of home as being a place where they are safe, have somewhere to eat, have a place to sleep, where they are supported by their family, and somewhere they can always go. They defined homelessness as sleeping on the street, living with friends, staying out all night because they had nowhere to go, sleeping in motels, and moving to different relative's houses regularly.

- Many youths had a complicated relationship between housing challenges and criminal activity. For many, the youths experienced housing challenges as a result of the criminal behaviour of their parents or family members, or the youth's families used criminal behavior to support the family while experiencing housing challenges. Often, this related to their parents' addictions and criminal behavior (e.g., selling drugs to support their own habits and not prioritizing the security of the youths, failing to pay rent because parents were sending money on alcohol).
- Many youths explained that they experienced an unstable housing situation when they were very young, and this was the primary cause of their engagement in criminal behavior and a cause for their homelessness and housing challenges. (E.g. Youth reported his mother being an addict, so he was placed in foster care, where he was abused. To cope with the trauma of his abuse, he turned to substance abuse. To financially support his substance use, he was forced to engage in criminal behavior.)
- This point does not relate to the responses that the youth gave, but instead, the ones they did not give. All youths were given the option to pass questions. When asking the youths if they had ever engaged in criminal behavior to support themselves, many youths said "pass" or that they had not engaged but would then describe the criminal behavior of others in detail. The interviewer believes that these were crimes that the youths may have been involved in, though there is nothing to support that.

### **Unique, but Important, Responses:**

- During a talking circle, one youth indicated that he believes community services like food banks and shelters are undesirable locations to utilize because of fear of being around gang members. The youth articulated that he would not visit those places for fear of the implications associating with gang members might bring. He did not elaborate on what these implications might be, though it is the opinion of the interviewer that it was a matter of personal safety and safety extended to the family members of the youth. The other four members of the talking circle agreed strongly with this point of view, but all seemed scared or uncomfortable to discuss the issue further.
- One youth reported that he does not know a home other than jail. He said it is the best home he has ever known because it is the only place where he can get everything he needs. He stated that he always has food and shelter in jail. Additionally, it is the only place he was able to meet with a service provider specializing in Indigenous issues regularly. Also, it was the best place to engage in self-betterment because there is a variety of programs and schooling available. Finally, it is a good place to get sober because you do not have to wait for support with detox.
  - The youth stated that while social workers and government agencies have told him that they will support him to have these things outside of jail, reality was the social workers were either too busy or too uninterested in helping him.

## Information from Service Providers:

### Frequent Responses

- The service providers reported the challenges in getting youth to be comfortable, trusting, and open with staff members. Staff reported that Indigenous youth general experience more trauma than other participants (racism, abuse, substance dependence) which has caused the youth to take longer to engage in the treatment and programming offered at their services.
- By the above point, service providers stated that they needed more time to work with Indigenous youth to actually make meaningful steps towards change and rehabilitation. For example, service providers said that it could take an Indigenous youth three months to really trust the service providers, by which time they would have completed the maximum allowed for time in the program. Overwhelmingly, service providers stated that they need more time to work with youth, especially Indigenous youth, for the youths to be helped in a meaningful way.
- Furthermore, service providers stated that there generally are not enough community resources to keep up with the demands required by Indigenous youths. Specifically, they noted the long waits for detox facilities and treatment programs. Additionally, they remarked on the fact that many programs are not accessible to youths. If a youth is experiencing substance dependence, they might not qualify for shelters or programs that require sobriety. The service providers noted that Indigenous youths experience high rates of substance abuse, so many of the community resources do not meet the needs of Indigenous youths.
- Indigenous youth experience tremendous bias from landlords, even when they find themselves in the position where they can support themselves. This occurs in the following ways:
  - Culture differences: Landlords fail to consider the different circumstances Indigenous youths might be coming from. Many Indigenous youths have more informal agreements for housing when they are homeless or living on reserve. They are more likely to live with family or friends without signing formal lease agreements. As a result, they are unlikely to have formal references requested by landlords.
    - Additionally, because of the more informal circumstances of their previous living situations, Indigenous youths might become intimidated by the formality of the process.
  - Racial discrimination: Many landlords have discriminated against Indigenous youth when they are seeking or living in their properties. Landlords were unlikely to rent to Indigenous youths because they believed them to be criminal, not wanting to attract criminal behavior to the property. They believed that Indigenous men would be dealing drugs out of the properties and that Indigenous women would be bringing 'Johns' and sex work to the property. They also believed that Indigenous youths were more likely to engage in substance abuse and be unable to make consistent payment.
- Indigenous youths experience bias from police organizations. They are stopped and checked more often by the police than non-Indigenous persons. Not only does this cause overrepresentation of Indigenous persons in the criminal justice system, but it also fosters a negative and untrusting relationship between Indigenous youth and the police.

- When asked about the relationship between criminality and homelessness and which comes first, the service providers stated that it starts childhood. Youths with traumatic upbringing tend to be the ones they are working with in their programs. The providers stated that if Edmonton wants to prevent Indigenous homelessness or criminal behavior, they need to do a better job supporting Indigenous families before these problems occur, instead of doing damage control.
- Service providers noted that this study would likely see more male participants than female participants. They said that this was because Indigenous youths who are female tend to have different coping mechanisms to support themselves through housing challenges than males. As a result, Indigenous women engage in different crimes than Indigenous men. The females were more likely to engage in sex work to support themselves. This way, they would be given a place to stay or whatever resource they might need (food, drugs, etc.) for their sexual services. Alternatively, male youth were more likely to engage in the sale of drugs, theft, or gang activity as means of supporting themselves.
- That, generally, there are insufficient resources in Edmonton to properly address the demands of youth homelessness, especially the specific needs of Indigenous youths.

### **Unique, but Important, Responses:**

- One service provider remarked that many female Indigenous youths with criminal charges or convictions were used as ‘fall girls’ for their family members because youths and females typically receive lower penalties than males. They said the women often went along with this owing to the tremendous familial obligation felt by Indigenous women.
- Another service provider noted that Indigenous youth are more likely to be stopped by police. They stated that the police stopped them so often that they are bound to catch them in violation of something in their orders. They believed that if anyone was stopped as often as indigenous youth then they would be caught doing something bad eventually. They believed that the bias and over scrutinizing against Indigenous youth was contributing to the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in the justice system.

## **Discussion**

### **Challenges:**

#### 1. Challenges in Recruitment of Participants

a) It was extremely challenging to recruit youth to participate in this study. This was expected to a degree by the research team as homeless or under-housed youth do not make up a large portion of the demographic of Edmonton.

b) Indigenous youth are suspect to the challenges associated with coming into contact with any person experiencing homelessness or housing challenges: they did not have an official means of reliable contact (e.g., cellphone or email address) which the interviewer could contact them through and instead relied on communication being relayed through service providers, youths lacked a permanent residence and would often have moved on by the time they were scheduled for interviews, youths did not have consistent schedules and would regularly miss appointments with their service providers, youths were often dealing with many challenges as a result of their homelessness or housing challenges and did not have the time to participate.

c) Indigenous youths were not highly represented in many of the community based residential facilities and shelters visited by the interviewer.

## Challenges in Establishing Trust with Participants

a) While the interviewer took time to build rapport with youths and make them comfortable, the youths interviewed have experienced enough trauma or negative experiences within the system that they did not appear fully comfortable detailing such personal details to a stranger. This coincides with what service providers said: that youths often did not become comfortable or trusting with them for several months. The youths likely did not want to share some things for fear of getting in trouble.

## **Challenges in Having a Representative Sample (Females and Non-Binary not represented)**

a) Female Indigenous youth were challenging to recruit to participate. We were not able to recruit any female Indigenous participants for the following reasons:

- i. The majority of community-based residential facilities in Edmonton are exclusively for male (or those who identify as male) clients.
- ii. Based on the interviews with service providers, female Indigenous youths can support themselves in different ways than the males, resulting in fewer Indigenous females coming into contact with community resources. Females more often supported themselves through prostitution and therefore were more likely to have a place to stay, compared to males who supported themselves more through theft or the sale of illegal drugs.
- iii. The facilities that specifically catered to women often put on women fleeing domestic abuse. As a result of the trauma experienced by these women, no clients at these shelters felt sufficiently comfortable to participate in this study. This again relates to challenges in establishing trust.

## **Applying Indigenous Methodology**

b) It was the original intention of the research team and the interviewer to conduct interviews with youth in the form of a traditional Indigenous talking circle. Throughout the course of the project, only one talking circle was accomplished, and nine individual interviews occurred. Talking circles were not possible for the following reasons:

- i. Talking circles were difficult to organize because the availability of youth participants was insufficient to organize group interviews, as identified above.
- ii. Many facilities would not permit the youth to engage in talking circles, as they had concerns for the privacy of their clients and the consequences it would have on the living environment.

## **Conclusions:**

This research acknowledged the fact that Indigenous youth were over represented in the homeless population across Canada and in Edmonton. The focus of this study was to explore the relationship between Indigenous youth homelessness and their involvement with the criminal justice system. That is to say, was homelessness the result of criminal behaviours or were such behaviours predicated by a lack of a safe, consistent and caring environment (i.e. “homeless”).

This intricate and complex relationship had not as yet been much researched to date in relation to Indigenous youth.

In order to understand this relationship accurately, the project deemed it crucial to conduct interviews in person with Indigenous youth who could be characterized as homeless and had some exposure to the justice system. This proved to be more challenging than anticipated for several reasons. Identifying Indigenous youth who were considered homeless AND who were willing to admit to criminal behaviours was very difficult. This difficulty was due in part to issues of trust between the youth and interviewer. Many of these Indigenous youth have had poor and negative experiences with outsiders and it takes time to establish a sufficient sense of trust to respond honestly to the questions. This also reflected a fear of self-incrimination or a certain amount of ambiguity over whether they had done anything illegal. Some of the interviewees answered in the third person when asked about criminal behaviours as to deflect any association of illegal activity from themselves.

The second issue involved their understanding of homelessness, and even where there was a basic understanding, they themselves might not categorize themselves as homeless if their residency patterns were fluid and always changing.

Nevertheless, we were successful in interviewing a number of youth who fit the criteria and what they reported as major issues was often supported by the service providers.

The key conclusions of this modest study are:

1. Confirmation that the home environment is an instrumental factor during the early years of the youth. Family instability and abuses experienced as a young person while living with adults engaged in criminal activities, living with addictions and with mental health issues and thereby unable to provide a consistent and caring family environment often resulted in youth transience behaviours and criminal activities in order to survive.
2. Surprisingly, many Indigenous youth said they were largely unaware of the services that exist to support them from the community resources (drop-in centers, shelters, food banks). However, once made aware of the available services they were considered to be helpful. Some youths reported that they were also unlikely to attend these facilities as they found them to be hard to access and sometimes dangerous environments for themselves;
3. Indigenous youth did not feel that their Indigenous culture was celebrated or even supported in any of the community resources (drop-in centers, shelters, food banks) they attended. They acknowledged that their families and home communities were their most significant connection to their culture but that community resources were not places where they could connect to or engage in Indigenous culture behaviours or practices.
4. Most of the community resources available to youth in the Edmonton area were geared to male clients; women community resources largely focused on domestic violence and abuse situations and thereby not available for single young Indigenous women.
5. The absence of any female respondents in this study was in large part due to different strategies developed by Indigenous female youth in response to homelessness. The consensus of the service providers, who also saw considerably fewer females than males, was that coping mechanisms by females included providing sexual services (in exchange for a place to stay or access to drugs, food etc.) or co-habiting with a male in a dysfunctional and unsafe environment.

6. Indigenous youths had fewer housing options even when they were able to support themselves as a direct result of prejudice against them. Landlords did not want Indigenous youths living in their rentals because they believed they would bring criminal behaviour to the property or that Indigenous youths would not be able to pay rent. This problem was further exacerbated when the youths had criminal records as landlords were prone to conduct criminal history checks before agreeing to a lease term.

## **Recommendations:**

### **For Community Resource Centres:**

1. To establish a shelter/drop-in center for members of the Indigenous community with staff specifically trained to address colonial and intergenerational trauma faced by Indigenous communities.
2. For existing community resources to place greater emphasis on incorporating Indigenous culture into their resources and programming. This could be achieved by communicating with members of the Indigenous community (or commissioning research) to see specifically what Indigenous youth need to feel supported.
3. That supportive housing solutions receive more resources so that they can support youths for longer. Given the fact that service providers report that it takes longer for Indigenous youths to feel trusting and comfortable in their programs, programs need to have the resources to support Indigenous youths for longer. Many service providers stated that the ideal amount of time to work with an Indigenous youth is a minimum of one year.
4. That affordable housing solution be made with consideration for the fact that landlords are often prejudiced against Indigenous youths. This would include:
  - i. Understanding that Indigenous youths coming from reserves or homelessness, housing challenges, or incarceration may not ever have been involved in a formal housing agreement like a lease and may therefore not have references.
  - ii. Designating affordable housing options specifically for Indigenous youths. This would serve to combat the racial bias that was described by both youths and service providers.
  - iii. Compensating for the fact that Indigenous youths may not be able to provide a damage deposit if they are coming from homelessness/housing challenges.
  - iv. Designating affordable housing options that will accept persons with criminal records. This would serve to combat the bias towards offenders that was described by both youths and service providers.

### **For Future Research**

1. If this project were to be attempted again or expanded on in the future, it is recommended that recruitment of youth participants take place on the street level in addition to at community resource facilities. It is likely that the persons experiencing the most extreme forms of homelessness (sleeping on the street or tenting) are underrepresented in this study as they are less likely to use or have access to community-based resources.
2. If this project were to be attempted again or expanded on in the future, it is recommended that the researching apply techniques of community-based research methodology in addition to their existing methods. If they were to act as interviewers, members of the studied group (or service providers who work with the studied group) would likely have more in-depth interviews as a result of their pre-existing, established trust with the youths. This would likely serve better than multiple interviews with the same youth, as youths can sometimes be hard to reach owing to their volatile housing situations (described in detail in Challenges, 1 above).