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Final Paper

Aboriginal Homelessness in Flin Flon, Manitoba

UAKN Prairie Regional Research Centre

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The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, the UAKN, is a community driven research network focused on the Urban Aboriginal population in Canada. The UAKN establishes a national, interdisciplinary network involving universities, community, and government partners for research, scholarship and knowledge mobilization. This research was funded by a SSHRC Partnership grant entitled Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network: research for a better life, for more information visit www.uakn.org.



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Abstract: Aboriginal people appear to be over-represented in urban homeless populations but there has been very little research on urban Aboriginal populations in small cities. This study of Aboriginal homeless in Flin Flon responded to a request from the Flin flon Aboriginal Friendship Centre for research on the characteristics and change in the number of Aboriginal homeless individuals in Flin Flon. Community members interviewed 32 Aboriginal adult homeless individuals in Flin Flon and also collected the perspectives of various service agencies. Based on the data collected, it appears that the proportion of Flin Flon's population that is Aboriginal homeless is higher than homeless statistics in Canada. Flin Flon's Aboriginal homeless people represent a high needs population with high levels of unemployment, welfare dependence, trauma and health needs. Education levels and income are low. The report made a number of recommendations for the Flin Flon Aboriginal Friendship Centre in cooperation with other service and City organizations in Flin Flon.

Literature Review/Conceptual Framework/How Research is Community-Driven: While Aboriginal people share some of the determinants of homelessness with other homeless populations, they experience additional unique factors stemming from colonial histories. Aboriginal people are over-represented among urban homeless populations across the country. Hidden homelessness, which is not counted in official "homeless counts" appears to represent an important strategy for urban Aboriginal people. This suggests that the issue of Aboriginal homelessness may be more serious than existing counts suggest.

There have been two main models of providing housing for homeless individuals. The "continuum of care" model attempts to make participants "housing ready" by providing services while they live in emergency housing or transitional shelters. The "Housing First" model attempts to put individuals in housing immediately and provides services while they are in that housing. Recent research suggests that the Housing First is less expensive taking into account all the costs of homelessness, and also more effective. Smaller centres face unique challenges in providing homeless services, including "Housing First" approaches.

The general literature suggests that Aboriginal organizations have an important role to play in providing services to Aboriginal people including urban Aboriginal homeless individuals. While there is limited research on culturally responsive services for urban Aboriginal homeless people,

the existing research suggests that Aboriginal organizations involved provide a number of unique services. The existing research also suggests that multiple-service delivery and partnerships between organizations are important.

Available census data suggest that Flin Flon housing and population characteristics do not differ from those of the province generally, except that Flin Flon has more housing in need of major repairs. These data do not address the situation of homeless individuals, and interviews with Aboriginal homeless people in Flin Flon suggest that they experience very poor housing situations, difficulty finding housing to rent, and considerable hardship.

The research in this study was requested by the Flin Flon Aboriginal Friendship Centre. The research methodology and tools were worked out in partnership between the academic and community partners, the Centre administered the interviews, and interpretations were formulated in consultation

Research Question/Objectives: 1) to help the Flin Flon Friendship Centre document the characteristics of and needs of the homeless Aboriginal population in Flin Flon; 2) to build research capacity by developing appropriate methods and instruments for studying the characteristics and dynamics of homeless Aboriginal people in small northern communities; 3) to develop recommendations for policy responses, and 4) to communicate results to a variety of relevant audiences.

Methodology: The purpose of the study was not to obtain a representative sample of Aboriginal homeless individuals in Flin Flon but to gain some understanding of their situation. The interviews took place between the beginning of August and the end of October, 2013. In total, 32 people participated. Participants for this study were reached through various avenues including interviewing some individuals staying in the Friendship Centre hostel, and through referrals through individual homeless networks. The Friendship Centre hostel manager conducted the interviews with homeless participants, as she was known in the community. The goal of the interviews was to obtain information about a variety of situations characterizing Aboriginal homeless people in Flin Flon. Participants received a meal voucher for the time they spent on the project.

The research project also interviewed a number of social agencies involved with homeless people in Flin Flon in order to gauge their familiarity with different homeless populations, the services they provided, and their sense of changes in the last five years. These interviews took place in agency offices, with key people who were knowledgeable about the situation.

The transcripts and interview results were written up and discussed by the partners.

Results/Findings: Credible estimates place the size of the Flin Flon homeless population at about 100 people, including families, youth going to school, people camping and living in vans, individual couch surfing in marginal situations, and people using the Friendship Centre hostel. Flin Flon's Aboriginal homeless population represents 1.7% of Flin Flon's total population (including the Saskatchewan portion of Flin Flon). In contrast, homelessness advocates estimate that approximately 0.5% of Canada's population is homeless. If we remove the number of

individual estimated to be couch surfing, Flin Flon's homeless population still represents .9% of Flin Flon's total population, about double the national rate.

This study interviewed 32 homeless Aboriginal adults living in Flin Flon. Participants were characterized by low income and education rates, high welfare dependence, and low levels of employment. Three quarters (75.0%) were First Nations and one quarter (25.0%) were Métis or non-Status. None had housing on their reserves and none could live with relatives on the reserve because of over-crowding. Two thirds of First Nations participants indicated that they would stay on reserve if they had their own housing there. The condition of housing on the reserves near to Flin Flon, including reserves in Saskatchewan, creates some serious jurisdictional issues in terms of responsibility for providing housing.

At the time of the interview, eight (25.0%) participants were staying in the Friendship Centre hostel, thirteen (43.8%) were couch surfing, eight (25.0%) were staying outside, and two (6.3%) were staying in other situations. All of the participants had experiences with homelessness in the previous two years. The conditions some of the participants described were quite simply shocking.

Participants' self-perceived health conditions were worse than those experienced by Canadians generally, and the majority of them had one or more chronic conditions, often associated with poverty, addictions, and violence. Two thirds had been physically or sexually abused, and many experienced other traumas. Over half said that they or someone else thought they had a drinking problem. These statistics point to a very high needs population.

There are a considerable number of organizations in Flin Flon that provide services to homeless individuals. Service use, especially for medical services, appears relatively high, and it may be that the provision of supportive housing would reduce these costs.

Given the situation of homeless Aboriginal individuals in Flin Flon and the apparent increase in their numbers, this appears to be an important issue for the City and various service organizations to begin to address.

Discussion, Knowledge Mobilization Activities, Recommendations: The results of the study will be presented to participants and stakeholders in Flin Flon in early May 2014. A presentation on this project will be made at a Saskatoon workshop in mid-May. The Flin Flon Friendship Centre will distribute and address the issues raised by the report as they feel fit. The results will be *submitted* for publication in the Canadian Journal of Urban Research and posted on the UAKN and Dr. Peters' website.

List of Recommendations from the Study

Recommendation: *Organizations working with homeless Aboriginal people in Flin Flon should attempt to pool their knowledge to derive a reliable estimate of the size and characteristics of the population.*

Recommendation: *Aboriginal homeless people are over-represented in Flin Flon compared to national averages. This appears to be a serious issue that requires the attention of service providers, the RCMP, and the City government.*

Recommendation: *The service providers' interviews suggest that there are quite a few organizations in Flin Flon who are concerned about homeless individuals and who provide a variety of services. These organizations should meet to work out a strategy.*

Recommendation: *Given the large number of Aboriginal homeless individuals in Flin Flon, the literature that indicates that a strong Aboriginal cultural presence is important in providing homeless services, and their current experience with homeless individuals, the Friendship Centre should take a leading role in homelessness strategies for Flin Flon.*

Recommendation: *Possibly working together with Flin Flon schools the Friendship Centre should extend its survey to explore the situation of youth homelessness in Flin Flon*

Recommendation: *Reserve housing remains an important source of urban homelessness nationally, and this appears to be the case in Flin Flon. This underlines the responsibility of the federal government in urban Aboriginal homelessness.*

Recommendation: *The very low employment and education rates of this population suggest that they will need supportive services even after they have been housed.*

Recommendation: *The high incidence of chronic conditions, addictions, trauma and abuse in the hidden homeless population suggests that simply providing housing will not be enough to meet their needs. A variety of services also need to be provided.*

Recommendation: *It may be useful for service providers in Flin Flon to explore the costs of providing services to homeless individuals who are high services users and to compare these costs to the expenses involved in providing supportive housing.*