HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING
IN A NORTHEASTERN ONTARIO, CANADA, FIRST NATION

A COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECT

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Abstract: This article describes a study on homelessness within a First Nation community (NEO FN), including the characteristics and reasons for homelessness, the size of the at risk population, service utilization, the impact of homelessness and models of collaboration between agencies. An objective was to gather information for the development of a community-based strategy for addressing homelessness, including the need and possibility of establishing transitional housing. The sample for the survey was 86 participants; it included men and women between the ages of 16 to 75. Twenty-seven people also participated in focus groups.

A substantial proportion of the survey respondents had experienced homelessness in their lifetimes or within the previous year. Thirty-six (42%) survey participants self-reported homelessness; of these 24 (28%) met the definition of absolute homelessness. Over half of those who were absolutely homeless indicated that the main reason was unemployment or a lack of income followed by a lack of housing available to them.

Despite a lack of housing available in the community, participants stated that families take care of their own members and usually find ways to provide accommodation, consistent with the traditional values of the community. Participants believed that the need for new housing in the community as well as housing services were paramount.

Keywords: Homelessness, housing, Indigenous, First Nation, northeastern Ontario.

Confidentiality: This article pertains to the housing circumstances of a northeastern Ontario First Nation situated near one of its four largest urban centres— North Bay, Sault Ste-Marie, Sudbury and Timmins. In order to maintain confidentiality and prevent the identification of the First Nation, we have only identified it as NEO FN, and the northeastern Ontario City as NEO City. We thank the NEO FN for permission to publish the results of the study.

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The housing conditions in First Nations communities have received considerable attention from policymakers, researchers and the media in recent years (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Optis, Shaw, Stephenson & Wild, 2012; Pallard, Kauppi & Hein, 2014; United Nations, 2013). In his report to the United Nations Human Rights Council about the situation of Indigenous peoples in Canada, James Anaya (2014) described a housing crisis. He cited overcrowding, deteriorating housing stock, housing shortages and the need for additional funding for new housing as major concerns within First Nations in Canada. Other researchers who have studied the health impacts of housing conditions in First Nations have noted that deficiencies, overcrowding and a lack of ventilation systems contribute to the growth of toxic mould which adversely affects human health through allergies, asthma, mucosal irritation, fatigue and a general weakening of the immune system (Optis et al., 2012).

There is substantial emphasis on the link between housing and homelessness. Shortages of appropriate, suitable, affordable housing exacerbate the problem

of homelessness (Waegemakers Schiff & Turner, 2014). Yet little research has been conducted on the issue of homelessness within First Nations communities. Most studies about homelessness among Indigenous peoples have been conducted in urban centres with some describing the movements of people between First Nations and urban communities (cf. Christensen, 2012). The current study contributes to knowledge about living circumstances by exploring the forms of homelessness within a First Nation in northeastern Ontario.

The NEO FN identified a need to conduct research on homelessness within the community and to gain an understanding of the characteristics and reasons for homelessness, the size of the at risk population, service utilization, the impact of homelessness and models of collaboration between agencies. There is also a need to gain a better understanding of the issues surrounding homelessness and the risk of homelessness and the strategies required to address them more effectively. A disproportionately high number of homeless persons in northeastern Ontario cities are Indigenous people. For example, nine separate studies have shown that Indigenous people make-up between a quarter and a third of homeless persons in the City of Greater Sudbury (Kauppi et al., 2009) although Statistics Canada (2008) states that their proportion in the total local population is less than 7%. Similarly, our research in Timmins and North Bay has shown that Indigenous people comprise approximately a third of the homeless people but less than a tenth of the total population of these northeastern Ontario cities. These results indicate that Indigenous people are at greater risk of becoming homeless compared to the general population in northeastern Ontario. However, there has been no prior research on the extent and nature of homelessness and core housing need in First Nations. The issue is best examined through a community-based approach to ensure that community members are involved in the project design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings and that appropriate strategies are developed to address it.

This article describes a community-based study that provides information about the extent, nature and impacts of forms and types of homelessness, characteristics of homeless persons, causes and reasons for homelessness. The study includes consideration of the "at risk" population as well as those who do not have a home. It examines how best to mitigate the impacts in a way that can lead to the development of a strategy for effectively addressing homelessness at the community level in the NEO FN.

Its main objectives were to conduct a research project that would advance knowledge regarding homelessness in the NEO FN and would provide information for the development of a community-based strategy for addressing homelessness, including an exploration of the need for and possibility of establishing transitional housing.

II. Approach to the Study

The project was initiated in early April, 2009 and data collection was completed in June, 2009. It was conducted in the form of a mixed-methods study by gathering quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) data and also by drawing on existing knowledge to provide the information needed by the community. The information is based on the knowledge of community stakeholders, including the Homelessness Project Team members (community members who included representatives of health staff, Band council, elders, and formerly homeless persons), the leadership (Chief and council), staff members and community members. Focus group discussions were held with key stakeholders. Homeless persons and those who were at risk of homelessness were invited to participate in the project in order to gather information about the nature, extent and impact of homelessness. The project was conducted in four overlapping phases.

Phase 1. Project plans, ethics, and data collection protocols

The project began with a meeting of the Homelessness Project Team to ensure their involvement in the entire study process; they provided input into the study plans, gave feedback on the findings and participated in the development of recommendations. In April, 2009, at the beginning of the project, a discussion was held with the NEO FN Homelessness Project Team to review the project plans and methods. This discussion helped to ensure that the Homelessness Team Members were in agreement about the approaches and methods used in the study, as well as the protocols for ensuring confidentiality of the information gathered. Based on guidance from the Homeless Project Team members, the study followed the *Guidelines for Ethical Aboriginal Research* that had been developed by an Aboriginal Health Research Review Committee (2003).

Various documents were developed including an introductory letter, consent forms, confidentiality agreements and the group interview guide. These documents outlined the project as well as key ethical principles such as voluntary participation, informed

consent and confidentiality. Individuals invited to participate in the study were provided with printed copies as well as a verbal explanation of the letter, the consent form and the group confidentiality agreement in the case of focus groups. The use of these guidelines and ethical practices ensured that the project was conducted in a manner consistent with the ethical principles established within Canada, especially with regard to research with Indigenous people.

Phase 2. Search for published literature

A literature search was conducted to examine prior studies pertaining to homelessness in First Nation communities, including the establishment of models for transitional housing, collaboration with community agencies, and issues relating to service utilization by community members. In addition, Homelessness Project Team members provided some existing documents giving background information about the NEO FN. The results of the literature search were used to inform the design of the study, with regard to key issues. However, the published literature retrieved by researchers on the Homelessness Project Team dealt with Indigenous homelessness within urban contexts. No published studies of homelessness within First Nation communities were found. The current study addresses a gap in the published literature on homelessness within First Nations.

Phase 3. Focus groups and interviews

Focus groups and interviews were held in June 2009 with the NEO FN community leaders, staff and community members. The interviews/focus groups obtained information on key issues related to the project, including:
- definitions (i.e., understanding how homelessness is understood and defined by community members in the NEO FN);
- extent of the issue (i.e. size of the homeless and at risk population);
- nature of the issue, including characteristics, causes and reasons and service utilization;
- indicators of the impact of the issue; and
- issue mitigation, including models of collaboration between agencies and strategies for service provision.

The interviews and focus groups were organized in a manner that was sensitive to the cultural needs of community members. They were facilitated by members of the research team. Four focus groups and individual interviews were held with a total of 27 participants. The participants were staff, community leaders, elders, and youth. A qualitative analysis was

conducted to identify relevant themes relating to each of the issues listed above.

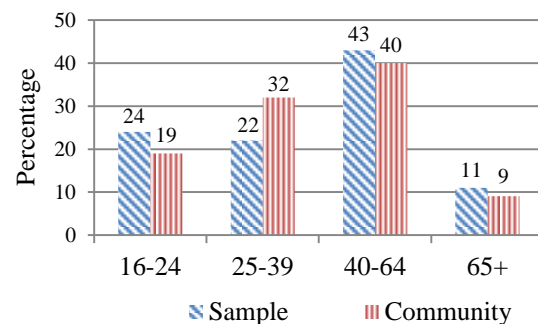## Phase 4. Community survey on homelessness and housing

The Homelessness Project Team decided that a community survey would enhance the study by providing quantitative data on homelessness and housing need in the community. Survey data can provide a sound estimate of the extent of the problem and compliment the information from the focus groups/interviews. A questionnaire used in research projects on homelessness in NEO City was adapted through consultation with the Homelessness Project Team and a community member. A community member was hired to administer the questionnaire to individuals in as many households as possible. The door-to-door survey was conducted from June 2009, and 86 community members participated. The main themes from the focus groups and interviews are presented below along with the survey results.

III. SAMPLE

Background characteristics of survey participants

The sample of 86 participants included men and women between the ages of 16 to 75. The average age was 42 years (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Age Groups of Participants in Sample and Community

Women comprised 58 % of the sample and 42 % were men (see Figure 2). The sample included married, single and divorced or widowed persons (see Figure 3). With regard to gender, age and family status, the subgroups within the sample generally approximate their proportions in the total population as reported in the 2006 Census. However, there were slightly more women, youth and single people in the sample compared to the population in the community, based on Statistics Canada's community profile.

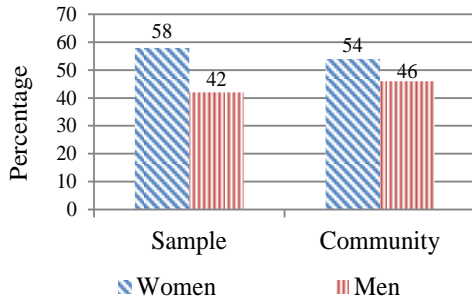## Figure 2. Gender of Participants in Sample and Community

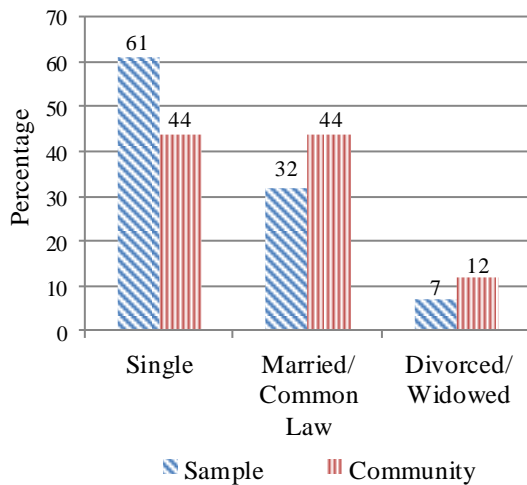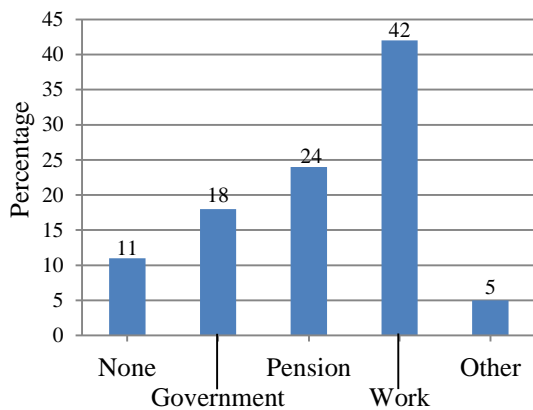## Figure 3. Family Status of Participants in Sample and Community

Figure 4. Sources of Income of Participants

The sample included those who were at risk of home-lessness due to low income since 11 % indicated that they had no source of income and 18 % were receiving benefits from Ontario Works, Ontario Disa-bilities Support Program or Employment Insurance (see Figure 4). Comparable data on sources of income for the population in the community are not available from the community profile published by Statistics Canada (2009).

IV. DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

In the focus groups, definitions of homelessness and the risk of homelessness were discussed. The partici-pants reviewed the definitions used in research on homelessness in NEO City and they agreed that the definitions of absolute homelessness and being at risk for homelessness were relevant for understanding this issue within the NEO FN. The following definitions were accepted in this study.

Absolute homelessness: A homeless person does not have a place that he/she considers to be home or a place where he/she sleeps regularly. Someone is homeless if:
- he or she has no place to call home OR
- his/her home is neither a room, an apartment, nor a house, OR
- his/her room, apartment or house is not his/her own OR
- he or she either stays there four times a week or less OR
- he or she has no arrangement to sleep there regularly.

At risk for homelessness: Due to particular circum-stances, the person is at an elevated risk for home-lessness (i.e. pending eviction, extremely low income, familial abuse, inability to pay rent, existing medical condition with no benefits).

V. FINDINGS

A. Housing status, homelessness and risk factors

1. NEO FN survey

Close to two-thirds of the survey respondents (61%) stated that they had their own home while 29 % did not. Those who did not have their own home to live in were in a range of housing circumstances including living with family members (e.g. parents or grand-parents), living in rental housing (including shared rent), or living in a trailer or vehicle. Some mentioned that there was no housing available for single persons or that they were saving money to move out of their current housing situation.

Most of the survey respondents stated that they had a room for themselves in which they could sleep (93%); however, some people indicated that they were sharing a room, staying in a basement, sleeping on a couch or sleeping in a vehicle. Therefore, some were defining "a room in which to sleep" as the room where they were staying, regardless of whether it was a room that was used by others at various time during the day or evening or whether it was a space that would not normally be defined as a "room". There was an identified risk, among 15 % of the respondents, indicating that they were vulnerable to losing their housing (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Perceived Risk of Losing Housing

- Vulnerable
- Not vulnerable

Based on an analysis of the responses to the survey, 24 people met the definition of absolute homelessness in that they did not have a place to live that was a room, an apartment, a house, or the room, apartment or house was not their own, or they had no arrangement to sleep there regularly. In addition, 23 people (including 11 who fit the definition of absolute homelessness) were at high risk of homelessness. Thus, 36 (24 + 23 - 11) individuals (42%) met the definition of homelessness used in this study.

A subgroup of 74 participants provided information about being homeless or at risk of homelessness. Of this group, 51 % did not indicate any risk factors for homelessness. A third (33%) met the definition of being absolutely homeless and another sixth (16%) identified one or more risk factors for becoming homeless (see Figure 6). It is important to note that there was also some overlap between the absolutely homeless and at risk groups since 15 % reported that they were absolutely homeless and at ongoing risk of homelessness due to their circumstances.

Figure 6. Percent Reporting Homelessness or Being At Risk

- No risk factors
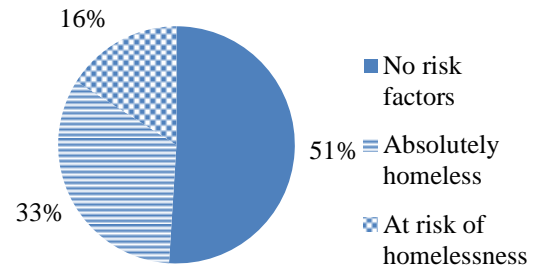- Absolutely homeless
- At risk of homelessness

Table 1 shows the reasons given for homelessness and the risk of homelessness. Over half of those who were absolutely homeless indicated that the main reason was unemployment or a lack of income followed by a lack of housing available to them. A few reported that problems with their housing status were related to schooling (i.e. either being in school or not being in school), family problems or transience.

Nearly three-quarters of those who were at risk of becoming homeless stated that the main reason was the lack of housing available. A few cited schooling issues or family problems.

2. Focus groups

Table 2 shows the main reasons for homelessness discussed in the focus groups and indicates the number of times each issue was mentioned (frequency of mention). Example quotations are also included to illustrate each theme. Participants in the focus groups discussed many of the same issues that were identified in the survey as reasons for homelessness (shown in Table 1). Thus, there is consistency between the survey results and the information from the focus groups with regard to the main reasons for homelessness in the NEO FN.

The primary reasons mentioned most frequently were problems with housing, the high cost of living, unemployment and a lack of education. In addition, focus group participants cited other factors such as a lack of independence among young people or a lack of survival skills and addictions. Several other issues were identified including difficulties in accessing transportation, involvement with crime, gambling addiction, identity issues, medical problems and the broader issue of the need for self-government.

Table 1. Reasons for Absolute Homelessness or Risk of Homelessness—Survey

Reasons	Absolutely homeless		At risk of homelessness	
	Cases	Responses	Cases	Responses
	N	%	N	%
Unemployment/low wages/no money/ low income	10	53	4	16
Lack of housing/housing problems/ unable to pay rent	4	21	18	72
Going to school or not going to school	3	15	1	4
Other (family problems, transience)	2	11	2	8
TOTAL	**19**	**100**	**25**	**100**

[a] Based on multiple responses.

B. Forms and nature of homelessness

1. Focus groups

Information from the focus groups indicated that there had been various forms of homelessness in the community. The participants were aware of the following types of homelessness:
- camping/tenting/living in the bush;
- underground shelter/shack;
- temporary accommodation (trailers, vehicles);
- youth kicked out of home and couch surfing;
- homelessness due to domestic violence; and
- homelessness due to overcrowding and lack of available housing.

Despite insufficient housing available in the community, participants stated that families take care of their own members and usually find ways to provide accommodation. This approach is consistent with the traditional values of the community which allowed for many people to stay together in a lodge. However, there were instances in which individuals or families are not able to be housed in the community.

Some of the themes pertaining to the *forms* of homelessness were also reflected in descriptions of the *nature* of homelessness. Many participants explained that, when housing is not available, some people find ways to live off the land by building outdoor shelters or creating shelter in vehicles (see Table 3). Others spoke of patterns of migration in which people move off the First Nation but return because the NEO FN is a small, tight-knit community where people help others who are facing difficulties. Even though the community greatly values efforts to help each other, it

is not always possible to take in or accommodate all people given the shortage of homes.

Another issue identified by some participants in the focus groups pertained to youth. An aspect of homelessness in the community was that youth who were affected by the risk of homelessness sometimes engaged in minor crimes such as vandalism and theft.

2. NEO FN survey

The survey identified many of the same forms of homelessness as were described in the focus groups:
- camping/tenting/living in the bush;
- temporary accommodation (trailers, vehicles);
- couch surfing (temporary sleeping accommodation on couches or in basements) and double bunking (sharing a room with another person in a family member's house); and
- homelessness due to overcrowding and lack of available housing.

3. Nature of homelessness

Homelessness among community members had occurred for some when individuals stayed in the community but had no access to housing and when individuals left the community. Some participants of the survey and the focus groups or interviews stated that they and/or their family members had become homeless when they had left the NEO FN. Many members subsequently returned to the community. Individuals who became homeless within the NEO FN were resourceful and used their traditional knowledge and skills of the land to live without housing. Some participants, particularly youth, expressed the view that people who were living in the

bush were drawing upon valuable traditional knowledge and should be permitted to live this way if it was by choice. However, others identified the challenges associated with living off the land.

Table 2. Reasons for Homelessness—Focus Groups

Description of themes	*Frequency of mention*	*Examples of quotations from focus groups*
Problems with housing and accommodation (e.g. lack of housing, overcrowding due to too many people living in one home, eviction, cannot afford to pay rent)	20	We have a shortage of housing. It cost a lot of money to build a house, to build the hydro, the water line… it is very expensive to develop that. There are too many families living in the home—young adults living with their parents. Some people have no place to go so they crash [with others]. Lack of housing, too many people, too many people at risk. One young woman had to stay in town because there is no place to stay here. Young people often don't have a place, plain and simple.
Cost of living is too high	11	Sometimes places are really expensive so that you can't find somewhere to live. It is really expensive. The cost of living goes up. Cost of living goes up, but Welfare doesn't go up.
Unemployment/Lack of jobs	8	The population is so small here. There are few jobs, if they are full, and then there is no job.
Lack of education	8	It seems that our youth are dropping out of school early in the process, not completing—then they are not able to go to college or university to acquire some skills so that they can get some employment. I think education [is important] too, because I've seen the education system, now they are trying to look at different ways for the youth to [complete schooling]—so, ideas to have co-op [are good]. Youth not going to school, there are problems with the work area environment and doing that [co-op] to receive credits.
Lack of independence and survival skills	4	[Need to] have those skills, skills to survive.
No support (family, friends, community); person not reaching out to get support	4	Not enough support, support services. There is no type of support group.
Involvement with drugs or alcohol	3	I think there is a lot of addictions too, drugs and alcohol problems. Not ready to get their mind set to get out of that cycle. I think that alcohol abuse, drugs—whatever they take—also has an impact.
Family problems	3	We could also have kids who are homeless; we don't know what is going on in the house. Depending on the family environment, some of our young people want to get away from that kind of environment—they want a good foundation and education. They [youth] don't want to be at home because of feeling neglected or other kind of abuse.

Table 3. Nature of Homelessness—Focus Groups

Description of themes	*Frequency of mention*	*Example quotations from focus groups*
Pattern of migration—people leave and return to the community when they have nowhere to go Tight knit community—people know each other and members are willing to help each other	9	Again they go back and live with who they can because it is their community. I believe that there is a sense of [community]… because everybody comes back eventually. We also know that we have more [people], more housing in NEO City, maybe living on the streets as well. We don't know. It is possible they are there as well. Over half of our population is off the reserve. That is a huge number.
Living off the land—building outdoor shelters or vehicles	5	Living in a bush, a tent, and so forth. Maybe because of that, they are living off the land. I am sure it is not easy. Could be like trucks, let's say someone is homeless they stay [in the vehicle] for a while. It is their home and no one will take them [in].
The link between homelessness, vandalism and theft (especially in youth)	3	[They say] there is nothing else to do, let's go break in there—a house.

3. Nature of homelessness

Homelessness among community members had occurred for some when individuals stayed in the community but had no access to housing and when individuals left the community. Some participants of the survey and the focus groups or interviews stated that they and/or their family members had become homeless when they had left the NEO FN. Many members subsequently returned to the community. Individuals who became homeless within the NEO FN were resourceful and used their traditional knowledge and skills of the land to live without housing. Some participants, particularly youth, expressed the view that people who were living in the bush were drawing upon valuable traditional know-ledge and should be permitted to live this way if it was by choice. However, others identified the challenges associated with living off the land.

C. Characteristics of the homeless population (survey and focus groups)

The results of the survey indicated that those who self-reported homelessness were a diverse group (see Table 4). A substantial proportion (40%) was youth under the age of 24 but a majority were adults between the ages of 26 and 69. This group included both females (54%) and males (46%). A slight majority were single or widowed (54%) while the remainder were married or in common law relationships. This group of participants did not have

their own homes but most (77%) indicated that they had a room to sleep in. About a quarter (24%) did not have any source of income and another third (32%) were receiving benefits from Ontario Works, ODSP, CPP or EI. About a third had employment income.

Table 4: Characteristics of the Homeless Population—Survey

Characteristics	*%*
Youth	40
Female	54
Single or widowed	54
No income	24
Income from benefits	32
Did not access services for housing	88
Was absolutely homeless in the past	81
Family members have been homeless	42

Over three-quarters (88%) had not accessed services for housing or homelessness and a similar proportion had been homeless in the past (81%). Close to half (42%) stated that a family member had been homeless in the past. Participants of the focus groups believed that numerous groups in the community were at risk

of becoming homeless or had been homeless in the past (see Table 5). Youth were most often identified as the subgroup that was at greatest risk of homelessness, followed by those with addictions and people with physical or mental illness. Some also felt that people without education and single parents were at an elevated risk for homelessness. A few focus group participants noted other groups who were at risk such as people who were seniors, unemployed or reliant on forms of income assistance, those without a support system of family and friends and those with bad habits, experiencing boredom, or involved in crime.

D. Access to shelter and services

1. Accommodation by relatives and other community members (survey)

A majority of the survey participants (54%) stated that they had children, relatives or other community members living with them. The number of people living in their home ranged between one and seven. The average was 3.6 other persons living in the home.

2. Access to housing services on or off NEO FN (survey and focus group/interviews)

Most survey participants (84%) had not accessed any services to obtain help with housing or homelessness. Those who had sought help from service providers cited the NEO FN housing, Native housing in NEO City, NEO City Housing, the Red Cross, the Canadian Hearing Society or Ontario Works. These survey findings were consistent with the results from the focus groups since it was stated that most people in the community who could benefit from assistance with housing issues had not sought help from services in the NEO FN.

E. History of homelessness

1. NEO FN survey

A substantial proportion of the survey respondents had experienced homelessness in their lifetime or within the previous year. Table 6 shows the percentage of those who had experienced homelessness or had family members who had experienced homelessness. The results indicated that, while few had slept on the streets as a result of homelessness, over a third of the participants (34%) had experienced absolute homelessness at some time in their lives and a quarter had been homeless in the previous year. A large proportion had family members who were homeless at the time of the study (40%) or in the past (45%). About a sixth had relatives who had become homeless after leaving the community. The relatives included daughters, step-children, brothers, uncles, cousins, or nieces/nephews.

Table 5. Perceived Characteristics of the Homeless Population—Focus Groups

Description of themes	Frequency of mention	Example quotations from focus groups
Youth	6	Younger people have no housing. So I think that this situation here is that we have a lot of young people who, if they did not have their parents they would have no place to live.
People with drug, alcohol or gambling addictions	5	I think there is a lot of addictions too, drugs and alcohol problems.
People with mental illness/depression or physical illness	4	We have some that are handicapped, some illness; some are in that situation that they are considered to be handicapped.
People without education	3	It goes along with it, the education. Education to build self-esteem [is needed].
Single parents	3	There are the single mothers.

**Table 6. Prior Experiences
of Homelessness—Survey**

	N	%
Absolutely homeless in lifetime	29	34
Absolutely homeless in last year	21	25
Was homeless when living off reserve	8	10
Slept on the streets in lifetime	2	2
Now have family members who do not have their own home	34	40
In the past, family members did not have a home	38	45
Family members have moved away from the NEO FN and have become homeless	11	15

One in ten participants had been homeless while living outside of the NEO FN. Most mentioned that they had been homeless in NEO City but a few mentioned cities in northwestern Ontario or southern Ontario. Most had left the NEO FN to seek work. Others mentioned family problems or events including family violence. Several stated that they were encouraged to leave by family members, friends or service providers. A few mentioned substance abuse or inability to obtain welfare as the reasons for leaving.

2. Comparison of history of homelessness in the NEO FN survey and the NEO City study

Information was available to make a comparison between results from the NEO FN survey and a prior study conducted in NEO City. The NEO City data were gathered through a household survey conducted primarily in low income neighbourhoods in the NEO City; 185 individuals had participated in the survey. It provided for a good comparison since the methodology was the same (i.e., a door-to-door survey) and some of the same questions were asked. The results shown in Table 7 indicated that experiences with homelessness in the NEO FN were much higher compared to low income residents in NEO City. Indeed, five times more community members in the NEO FN had experienced homelessness than community members in NEO City. Ten times more residents in the NEO FN had family members who were homeless at the time of the study. Further, five times more relatives of the NEO FN community members had been

homeless in the past. These results indicate that residents of the NEO FN had a greater likelihood of experiencing homelessness compared to low income people in NEO City.

Table 7. Comparison of Prior Experiences of Homelessness in the NEO FN and NEO City

	NEO FN 2011	NEO City 2003
	%	%
Absolutely homeless in lifetime	34	7
Now have family members who do not have a home	40	4
In the past, family members did not have a home	45	9

F. Impact, needs and models

1. Focus groups—impact of homelessness

In the focus groups, a discussion was held about the impact of homelessness on persons who experienced the lack of housing. There were two main responses (see Table 8). First, it was believed that homelessness or the risk of homelessness impacted negatively on the sense of self for community members.

A second influence on individuals was from the stress that they experienced. Stress resulted from leaving home, being on the streets and living/sleeping outdoors without a home, needing to rely on social assistance (Ontario Works) or not having adequate funds to support oneself and/or family. The impacts were said to be most severe for people who became absolutely homeless and lived outside in the bush or in vehicles, relied on community members for a place to sleep (i.e. couch surfers) or left the NEO FN and lived in overcrowded accommodations in an urban setting (such as motels or emergency shelters).

Focus group participants also mentioned impacts on physical or mental health. An individual experiencing mental health problems or a family member having such problems could lead to homelessness. Health challenges could impact on the whole family and provide the catalyst for a series of events that resulted in homelessness. People often wanted to stay in the NEO FN but left because of a lack of housing options and difficulty in accessing health services.

Table 8. Impact of Homelessness on the Person—Focus Groups

Description of themes	Frequency of mention	Example quotations from focus groups
Low sense of self Loss of purpose	3	I think that there is a general goal of successes. I think people are losing confidence... It is very difficult for some of them. People can't advocate for themselves [when they become homeless]. Some people just carry on and don't make any attempts to make their life any better. Or tell themselves the truth that they should make their lives better… I think our numbers are great too. It tends to grow and grow and grow. When you have one, two or three you can deal with it. But when you have a large group that is feeling like it has lost a sense of purpose, you know, it seems to manifest itself.
Stress (being on the streets, leaving home, having inadequate funds)	3	This [poverty/low income] applies to stress as well. It is a real hardship for many families who have to rely on welfare also for their livelihood. What they [welfare recipients] are getting now is much less. It is hard to find living accommodations. The money that you get basically accommodates for your housing and can't pay for [other basic needs], so something has to give.

Anger or boredom were also identified as impacts of homelessness, particularly among youth. Experiencing negative feelings was also linked to community-level problems such as vandalism. Finally, it was also noted that homelessness increased the general levels of stress in the community for service providers and other community members.

2. Focus groups—needs of homeless people

The participants of the focus groups recognized the varied needs of persons who were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. As shown in Table 9, the needs for new housing in the community as well as housing services were believed to be paramount. Participants also emphasized the importance of education. Some noted that a new education plan developed by NEO FN could provide guidance that would be helpful in addressing the needs of those who were at risk for or experiencing homelessness. Other needs dealt with employment, adequate income and related issues such as ensuring that people have the means to obtain food and knowledge about how to have a healthy diet.

The focus group participants also recognized that people who were vulnerable to homelessness had needs around transportation, medical attention and medicine, aid for students, and services such as those to help people deal with addictions. In addition, it was noted that there was a need for community edu-

cation about homelessness within the NEO FN combined with steps to return to traditional ways of fostering a stronger sense of community.

3. Focus groups—service utilization and models of collaboration

Participants of the focus groups discussed service utilization by homeless people and those at risk of homelessness. The discussion also touched on the nature of collaboration with other agencies. These were not areas in which participants spoke at great length, perhaps because it was perceived that homeless persons and those at risk tended not to access services. It was believed that many people either did not have an awareness of the services available to support them or that they did not recognize how they could benefit from services (see Table 10).

With regard to collaboration between agencies, there was agreement that there must be more emphasis on making connections with other agencies so that it occurred more often and good working relationships could be fostered. Thus, it was felt that more time and effort should be expended in networking with other service providers, especially in the area of housing. In addition, it was noted that service providers should be engaging in outreach in the community and informing homeless persons and those at risk about the available services.

Table 9. Needs of Homeless People—Focus Groups

Description of themes	Frequency of mention	Example quotations from focus groups
Housing programs	15	Housing services. We don't have a lot of services available. We need a new subdivision—that has been worked on, but that's been on hold for a few years.
Life skills and education	8	The basic line is education. It is about why is it like this in the NEO FN? You can help them, but we have to teach them about being responsible. We can help you get a place; we can help you get a job as much as possible. But they have to take that responsibility.
Healthy food (ensure healthy eating)	4	The skills to survive…education [such as] community kitchen. Eat healthy.
Help and support outside the family (especially youth)	3	But there is also people out there who need help, who are living with their parents.
Employment	3	Young people, construction work, something along those lines. It seems that our youth are dropping out of school early in the process [and] not completing it. They are not able to go to college or university to acquire some skills so that they can get some employment.
Increase amount of income (Ontario Works and Ontario Disabilities Support Program)	3	I know lots of groups who've been saying this time and time again. I've been advocating for it—an increase in the welfare program. Which I think it is certainly needed especially in this time—in this type of economy. There has not been any movement in terms of bringing welfare payments back to the level it was at [prior to the mid-1990s], even though it is hard for individuals to live on this [amount]. It is a real hardship for many families who have to rely on welfare.

Table 10. Services to Deal with Homelessness—Focus Groups

Description of themes	Frequency of mention	Example quotations from focus groups
Models of collaboration between agencies –Working together on a housing program –Networking to address the disconnect between agencies	5	Could be working with the issues of housing. Housing Program, networking should happen. We could work together to get housing, more homes. Need time for working together. Services should market themselves.
Service utilization by homeless people –People do not use services or are not aware that some services exist	3	They are not reaching out to the services that we do have in the community. Some people, for years, they don't think there is a crisis but it is a crisis. [When someone needs medical attention] that is when they seek help. People don't know about the services.

4. NEO FN survey—what should be done

All 86 survey participants provided their views on what should be done to address homelessness and housing in the community. Table 11 shows the responses. Half of the respondents stated that the community should build new, affordable housing units. About a fifth of the participants were of the opinion that transitional housing or a shelter should be established in the community. Others wanted the community to provide additional trailers as a form of immediate housing or to enhance the existing housing in the NEO FN. Some felt that the emphasis should be on enhancing services to address homelessness, including approaches to dealing with education and training.

**Table 11: Action Required to Deal
with Homelessness—Survey**

Recommendations of survey participants	%
Build new, affordable housing units	50
Establish transitional housing or shelter	18
Provide trailers	9
Enhance services	8
Address education and training	8
Enhance existing housing	4
Other	3

Those who wanted to see the establishment of new, affordable housing recommended a range of options, as follows:
- affordable housing, low income housing;
- apartments;
- small, one-bedroom houses;
- townhouses;
- single housing units; and
- rooming house.

Survey participants who supported the creation of transitional housing identified various forms, such as the following:
- group home;
- youth housing;
- homeless shelter/emergency shelter;
- temporary housing; and
- hostel.

Participants who described services that were needed mentioned the following:

- moving help services/start-up funds;
- youth services;
- life skills training/financial planning;
- referrals to off-reserve agencies;
- drug/alcohol treatment; and
- mentoring program.

VI. CONCLUSION

The information from the household survey and the focus groups showed that homelessness existed in the community in the form of absolute homelessness and high risk for homelessness. The survey showed that a substantial proportion of people met the definition of absolute homelessness or being at high risk for homelessness (42%). A comparison of results from the present study with results from a household survey conducted in NEO City in low income neighbourhoods indicated that five times more community members in the NEO FN had experienced homelessness in the past compared to the residents in NEO City. It is reasonable to conclude that vulnerability to homelessness was high for many community members in the NEO FN.

All 86 survey participants gave recommendations for action to address homelessness in the NEO FN. Half wanted to see new affordable housing units developed. Close to a fifth thought that some form of transitional housing or shelter should be established in the community. The focus group participants stated that more time and effort should be put into services to support people who are homeless or near homeless.

During the course of this study, participants mentioned traditional ways of living in which many people lived together in a lodge; the traditional lifestyle provided housing for all community members. With the signing of a treaty, much of the First Nation's land was taken in the 1800s. Participants also mentioned that some members of the community had been forced to attend residential schools. According to the 2008 National Benchmark Survey (Environics, 2008) conducted for the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, over eight in ten Indigenous people "personally know someone who was (or may have been) a student in an Indian residential school". The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement recognizes the harm and ongoing impact of the residential school experience within Indigenous communities. Similarly, Waldram (2008, p. 3) observed that "the legacy of the residential school system has left a deep impact on the social, cultural, and psychological make-up of individuals" due to ongoing intergenerational effects within families and communities. The extent to which

the colonial past has contributed to the issue of home-lessness on the NEO FN was not examined in depth within this study. Nor was the extent to which resi-dential schools may be a contributing factor to home-lessness on the NEO FN addressed.

Over time, the community had grown significantly and there were approximately 120 houses located in the community as well as 30 cottages on various lakes throughout the First Nation. Yet, as noted in infor-mation from the NEO FN, the total population was over 1000 members. The existing stock of housing did not address the need for housing in the com-munity. As a result, many community members had moved and lived off-reserve. In the light of the findings in this study indicating that a substantial proportion of community members or persons in their families had experienced homelessness, considering how experiences related to colonialism and federal government underfunding of First Nations are under-lying factors that have contributed to core housing need and homelessness in the NEO FN is vital.

Finally, a search of the published literature did not reveal any other studies of homelessness within First Nation communities.[1] All other reports and articles located dealt with Indigenous homelessness within urban settings. It appears that the NEO FN has broken new ground within First Nations by conducting research in the community with the objective of identifying strategies to mitigate against homelessness among its members.

Shortly after the completion of the study, the NEO FN undertook an important housing initiative. It created a new subdivision with fully serviced lots. It partnered with a premier contractor in order to build sustainable and efficient homes while enhancing com-munity design and planning. In the construction of these homes, the builders utilised appropriate green technologies and clean energy sources with the goal of improving health and living conditions in the com-munity. A new type of concrete as well as non-toxic materials were used, thus making the homes resistant to mould and fire. The project also provided skills in the construction industry to members of the NEO FN. The housing was designed to integrate First Nation concepts about health, the importance of the extended family, and traditional social systems.

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[1] Other First Nations may have conducted studies on home-lessness within their communities. However, there is no readily available way of determining this since those reports are not easily accessible.

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