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Community Partnership
Native Men’s Residence Toronto

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Research Components
• Individual Interviews (5 with housing workers, 15 residents)
• Memoranda of understanding with local Aboriginal service providers
• Community steering committee meetings
• Development of print, DVD and electronic resources

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Aboriginal Homelessness and Mental Health
Exploring the supports and challenges of Aboriginal people on the streets

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The context
Statistics demonstrate a near crisis of homelessness for Indigenous adults, many whom live in urban communities such as Toronto. Indigenous peoples face multiple housing barriers related to poverty, access, literacy weakness, discrimination, colonization, addictions, mental health & intergenerational trauma of residential school. Many Aboriginal individuals may move to Toronto to:
- Utilize the numerous Aboriginal services and culturally-specific housing in the city
- Utilize job and education opportunities

Many individuals, once they have migrated to an urban area, find themselves at risk of life on the street or adopting a lifestyle of homelessness:
- This often takes them further away from their traditional cultural identities.
- Often pulls them into involvement in the sex trade, and abuse or addictions.

Peoples’ experiences of homelessness often lead to distress, and personal satisfaction or dissatisfaction has been shown to be a significant predictor of overall mental health. Little is known about the details of Indigenous peoples’ experiences of living on the streets, and even less has been written about those who survive and thrive in street life settings, despite mental health obstacles.

The current study
This research explores the experiences of Indigenous people in episodes of homelessness in Toronto, and will contribute new insights to understanding the immediate and pressing issues facing these Indigenous people so that appropriate health services and policies can be mobilized. Thus the research question asks: What supports, challenges, and barriers do Aboriginal people experience in regard to harm-reduction approach to homelessness.

Emerging Themes
- Strong relationship between homelessness, mental health and addictions.
- Need for a continuum of shelter/housing including: wet shelters so active users can have access to services, harm reduction services, and abstinence based shelters for non-users or those in process of healing.
- Healing from mental health and addictions experiences were very diverse (some experienced barriers such as cycling through the system, while others received adequate support).
- Connection with Indigenous culture proved to be a personally successful or promising pathway of healing.
- Important for Indigenous elders and healers to recognize that many Indigenous people will not be able to follow cultural protocols around abstinence and engaging in cultural practice (e.g. four days of abstinence to attend ceremony).
- Multiple social services are needed as a part of housing and more housing central to Toronto.

Dissemination
Healing from homeless resource development tools and strategies:
- Print, DVD & web-based resources for diverse community audience groups
- Community workshops delivered on-site to Aboriginal agencies dealing with homelessness for both workers and client/community members

Results will be shared with:
- Community partners
- Academic colleagues/students
- Educators
- Mental health professionals
- Policy makers
- Urban Aboriginal residents, teachers, parents, Elders, service workers, and other community agencies

Implications
Research and funding is needed to develop an Aboriginal Homelessness Strategy to create and strengthen Aboriginal-specific services, which are currently sparsely available.

This project is currently in the analysis and dissemination phase.