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Urban Hidden Homelessness and Reserve Housing

Evelyn Peters and Vince Robillard

Introduction

I don't know if they'd ever do it, but they promise natives education and housing in treaties. Why couldn't they give me a lot here? I'm a walking reserve. I'm a nation. (Hidden homeless Aboriginal male)

A number of studies have emphasized the over-representation of First Nations people in the homeless population (Beavis et al. 1997; Begin et al. 1999; Golden 1999). Attempts to count homeless individuals in particular cities—Toronto, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Calgary, and Winnipeg—have found large First Nations homeless populations (Ambrosio 1992; Arboleda-Florez and Holley 1997; Caputo et al. 1994; Hauch 1985; Kinegal 1989; City of Calgary 1996). Most of these studies have focused on the population on the streets or in shelters of various kinds, rather than on the hidden homeless—people who use informal mechanisms (e.g., friends and family) to reduce absolute homelessness. The over-representation of First Nations people in the absolutely homeless population suggests that they will also be over-represented in the hidden homeless population. However, there is very little information available about this group (but see Distasio 2004; SIIT 2000).

This paper is based on a collaborative research project between the Prince Albert Grand Council Urban Services Inc. and the University of Saskatchewan.¹ The project (Exploring First Nations Hidden Homelessness in Prince Albert) is unique in that it involves a First Nations organization working with university researchers to explore urban First Nations issues. This paper is part of a larger longitudinal study that is exploring factors associated with change, or lack of change, in the housing situation of individuals over time. Here we will explore the relationship between the availability and conditions of reserve housing and the hidden homeless among urban First Nations band members.

The following section is a literature review that places this study in the context of work that addresses factors facilitating and constraining the movement of First Nations band members out of homelessness. We then provide some background with respect to housing conditions on reserves. The method used in the study is outlined, followed by a brief description of the participants. Finally, the paper describes participants' access to housing on reserves, their perspectives on their

ability to obtain housing on reserves, and whether they would move to the reserve if they had access to housing there.

Movement out of Homelessness: A Review of the Literature

While there is relatively little research on First Nations people and hidden homelessness, there is some work on homelessness in other populations that helps to put First Nations experiences in context. The following paragraphs summarize some of this work, and identify material that speaks directly to the experience of First Nations people.

The literature on homelessness suggests that there are various personal factors enabling or acting as barriers to an individual's ability to exit from homelessness (Allgood and Warren 2002; Dworsky and Piliavin 2000; Piliavan et al. 1996; Wong et al. 1998; Zlotnick et al. 1999). Personal characteristics commonly associated in the literature with moving out of homelessness include human capital (education, training, employment history) and social networks (access to informal support). Personal characteristics commonly identified as barriers to becoming homed include personal disabilities (i.e., physical and mental health status, substance abuse) and acculturation to homelessness (i.e., a history of homelessness). Some of these elements have also been identified in literature on Aboriginal homelessness (Beavis et al. 1997). However, additional factors identified in work on homeless Aboriginal people include the effects of family violence, the lack of housing on reserves, and the process of making a transition to the city (Beavis et al. 1997; Distasio 2003; Golden 1999; LaPrairie 1994). Some research on service needs and service provision to urban First Nations populations emphasizes the fragmentation of services among different levels of jurisdiction and the lack of central sources of information (Hanselmann 2002; SIIT 2000).

These personal characteristics interact with interventions and opportunities that may act as catalysts for change in housing situations. Most of the literature focuses on the determinants of homelessness, rather than on the characteristics and events that precipitate exits from homelessness (Sosin 2003). Nevertheless, from some longitudinal studies and from studies of homeless individuals that also make policy recommendations, we can group interventions and opportunities that might facilitate movement out of homelessness. Available studies focus on three main areas of intervention (Allgood and Warren 2002; Early and Olsen 2002; CMHC May 2003; CMHC July 2003; Klodawsky 2003b; Orwin et al. 2003; Piliavan et al. 1996; Stojanovic et al. 1999; Zlotnick et al. 1999). The first area has to do with the provision of a variety of social support services to the homeless, including services that address physical and mental health and addictions, housing information and advocacy, anti-violence programs, and training and assistance with finding employment. A second area of intervention is the increase of individual and family income through employment or the availability or increased levels of

social assistance. A third intervention addresses the increased provision of subsidized or affordable housing. While these factors are also identified in the limited literature on Aboriginal homelessness, this material adds the importance of culturally appropriate support services, spiritual healing from the effects of colonial histories, and the importance of increased First Nations control over housing initiatives (Beavis et al. 1997; Golden 1999; Lobo and Vaughan 2003; Obonsawin 1999; SIIT 2000).

This paper focuses on the last area of intervention and on opportunities that provide a context for homelessness—the provision of subsidized or affordable housing. However, this analysis is a departure from the focus of existing studies, as most of the existing work on the relationship between homelessness and housing characteristics assumes that the particular community being studied represents the appropriate locale for assessing housing availability. This may not be the appropriate scale for examining housing and homelessness for First Nations people, however. For them, the condition and availability of housing on reserves may affect their housing situations in urban areas.

As urban First Nations populations grow, and an increasing proportion of the First Nations population comes to live in cities, it might seem that reserves and rural areas are depopulating as Aboriginal people move to urban areas. However, analyses of migration patterns suggest that this is not actually what is happening. Since 1986, the proportion of Aboriginal people moving from urban areas to reserves and rural communities has been larger than the proportion moving from reserves and rural communities to urban areas (Norris and Clatworthy 2003). It appears that the pattern of migration for contemporary First Nations people is not one in which reserves and rural areas are depleted by movement to urban areas.

Early academic analyses of Aboriginal urbanization have demonstrated an expectation that Aboriginal migrants to cities would eventually become permanent urban dwellers (Frideres 1974, 1983, 1993). Contemporary patterns of mobility suggest that this is not happening for all First Nations people. Mary Jane Norris has identified a back-and-forth movement between urban and reserve areas that she called “churn” (Norris and Clatworthy 2003). A recent study of recent First Nations migrants to Winnipeg found that a substantial number had moved out of Winnipeg and back again within a six-month period (Distasio 2004). Strong patterns of movement back and forth between urban areas and reserve areas emphasize the continuing importance of these communities for urban First Nations people.

In this context, it is appropriate to think carefully about the geographic scale at which we consider the role of housing in affecting homelessness. It may be that the unavailability of housing on reserves influences the decisions of First Nations people to move to urban communities and, particularly for the purposes of this paper, their presence in the hidden homeless population. Here we will attempt to relate housing issues on-reserve to urban First Nations hidden homelessness.

Conditions of Reserve Housing in Canada

The housing situation on reserves has been a matter of concern for many decades. In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) found that First Nations housing conditions fell considerably below the standards for other Canadians. In 1991, 38.7% of housing on-reserve was in need of major repairs, compared to 6.8% of housing for other Canadians. On reserves, 11.5% of houses had no bathroom facilities and 19.4% had no flush toilets, compared to 0.6% and 0.5% for other Canadians, respectively. The Royal Commission noted that, on reserves, more than 39.2% of the needs of residents in housing were not being met and that 12.9% of residents were on waiting lists. The commission proposed a 10-year strategy to remove barriers to improved housing, and to make strategic investments to bring the housing stock to a level of adequacy (RCAP 2006, 365–78).

Ten years after the publication of the commission's report, there are still serious problems with housing on reserves.

According to the most recent census, about 12% of houses in First Nations communities are overcrowded, compared to 1% elsewhere in Canada. Data, as of March 31, 2005, indicate that of the almost 96,800 houses in First Nations communities, more than 21,200 (21.9%) are in need of major repairs and about 5,500 (5.7%) need to be replaced. (Indian and Northern Affairs 2005. See also CMHC 2004, 2)

At the federal government's recent roundtable on Aboriginal housing, the Assembly of First Nations had this to say:

The shortage of First Nations housing in Canada has reached crisis proportions. According to the April 2003 Auditor General's Report, there is a shortage of 8,500 units across the country. However, internal INAC [Indian and Northern Affairs Canada] figures suggest that the actual shortage is 20,000 units, with an additional 4,500 new units required annually simply to stop the backlog from increasing. (AFN 2004,1)

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) pointed out that the shortage of housing on reserves made it difficult for individuals who had regained their status under Bill C-31 to gain access to reserve housing.

Analyses of the implications of the conditions of reserve housing focus most often on the implications for reserve communities. For example, the Government of Canada's "Fact Sheet on Aboriginal Housing" (2005) states that "the limited supply of housing not only leads to unhealthy, overcrowded conditions but it also accelerates the depreciation of the housing stock. It affects the health and well-being of *Aboriginal people living on reserve*" (emphasis added). However, the condition of reserve housing raises some questions about housing conditions for First Nations people in urban areas. Do some of the individuals who have applied for housing live temporarily with friends and family in nearby towns and cities? Would the improvement of on-reserve housing make a dent in the urban hidden homeless population? Some of these issues will be explored in the remainder of this paper.

Methods

According to the census, the population of Prince Albert in 2001 was 34,291, with an Aboriginal identity population of 10,185. A large proportion of the Aboriginal population is made up of First Nations people, and represented by the Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC). City planners and representatives of First Nations organizations suggest that the First Nations population in Prince Albert may be higher than that reported by the census because of the difficulty in documenting a mobile population, many of whom live with other households.

Exploring First Nations hidden homelessness in Prince Albert is a panel study that attempted to interview hidden homeless people three times over an 18-month period. Because the available literature suggested that gender, age, and family status affect the experience of homelessness, the study attempted to interview 25 individuals from each of five groups: male and female youth (15–19), male and female adults (20 and over), and individuals living with dependent children. The purpose of the study was not to obtain a representative sample of the hidden homeless population but to gain some understanding of the situation of these five groups. Moreover, the goal was not to focus on determinants of homelessness but to explore reasons for change over time. The first set of interviews was an attempt to gain some baseline information that could be compared with the situation of participants in subsequent interviews.

The initial set of interviews took place between June 13, 2005, and September 16, 2005. In total, 143 people participated. The data discussed in this paper are based on 109 interviews with individuals who indicated they were band members. This included 22 individuals who had dependent children living with them, 22 adult males, 22 adult females, 22 male youth, and 21 female youth.

Participants for this study were reached through various avenues. The assistance of organizations in Prince Albert was critical in reaching hidden homeless people because they had contact with clients who were living with others, and the ability to refer them to the study. Organizations also had an established rapport with, and the trust of, potential participants, on which researchers could draw to build the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Over the summer of 2005, a total of 57 (39.9%) participants came to the study as a result of posters and pamphlets at organizations or referrals from organization staff. Information and interviewing sessions at organizations generated another 22 (15.4%) participants. There were also attempts to reach people who did not use organizations. Interviewers used direct recruiting on days when there were few interviews scheduled or when scheduled interviews fell through. The geographical scope of this recruiting was limited to downtown Prince Albert. Direct recruiting generated 27 (18.9%) participants. Nine participants (6.3%) were referred to the study by a friend or family member. Interviewers also drove to areas outside the downtown core to put up posters at apartment complexes, laundromats, corner stores, grocery stores, daycares, colleges, hospitals, health clinics, and street

posts, in order to recruit city-wide. Overall, 28 (19.6%) respondents were reached by using posters around the city.

While there was an attempt to contact people from a spectrum of hidden homeless situations, it is likely that the project was biased towards individuals with more precarious socio-economic characteristics. Posters and recruitment materials used a variety of terms, including “couch surfing” and “can’t afford your own place,” but it is likely that individuals going to school, or working and rooming with friends or relatives to be able to afford rent, would not refer to themselves as “hidden homeless” or as “couch surfing.” The aggregate characteristics of the participants described in **Table 12.2** suggest that many of these individuals were socio-economically marginalized. While the project did not attempt to obtain a representative sample, it is important to recognize that the methods employed meant that we probably interviewed a particular segment of this population.

Participants were screened with an initial question to establish if they identified themselves as First Nations and if their housing situation classified them as “hidden homeless.” The majority of participants met the interviewer at the downtown offices of PAGC Urban Services Inc. Interviews were carried out at various locations, including restaurants, PAGC Urban rooms, and quiet areas in various organizations. The first step of the interview involved an explanation of the project, signing a consent form, and the collection of personal information so that participants could be contacted for the subsequent interview. Most interviews were taped and interview times varied from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours. Interviews combined qualitative questions with quantitative questions and scales. Participants received a cash honorarium for the time they spent on the project. They also received a contact card and a list of resources. In many cases, the interviewer pointed out specific organizations most useful to the participant, and some participants were referred to the front desk to apply for PAGC programs, such as ABE10, jobs, and transitional housing applications.

Characteristics of Participants

Before we discuss the social and economic characteristics of the population interviewed for this study, it is important to situate them within the larger urban First Nations population. In the context of the public perception that all urban First Nations people are poor and socio-economically marginalized, it must be emphasized that urban First Nations residents, increasingly, are coming to be represented in the employed, well-educated middle class (Wotherspoon 2003). The population interviewed for this project is not representative of all urban First Nations people. Participant characteristics are presented in order to provide a context for the analysis of reserve housing and urban homelessness that follows.

Except for male youth, most of the participants considered themselves to be homeless (**Table 12.1**). It is difficult to interpret male youth responses. It may be that most of the male youth interviewed are still living with family or kin at their

Table 12.1: Participant Characteristics

	Family* (n=22)	Adult Male (n=22)	Adult Female (n=22)	Male Youth (n=22)	Female Youth (n=21)
Define themselves as homeless (%)	72.20	81.80	80.00	27.80	66.70
Average number in household	6.60	3.70	4.90	5.00	5.80
Live in house/duplex/row house (%)	72.70	59.10	50.00	80.00	76.20
Average number of bedrooms	3.00	2.00	2.30	2.90	2.70
Housing unit rented (%) ¹	86.40	100.00	86.40	90.90	90.0
Have own bedroom (%)	68.20	36.40	36.40	50.00	42.90
Average health rating ²	3.20	2.70	2.90	2.40	3.00
Average age	27.60	30.40	33.30	17.60	17.60
Age range	19-51	23-48	22-63	15-19	16-19
Single (%)	45.50	68.20	77.30	95.50	81.00
Grew up on reserve (%)	9.10	41.00	33.30	36.40	23.80
Average number of children ³	2.70	2.50	3.10	0.00	0.02
Main income from social assistance (%) ⁴	68.20	77.30	86.40	45.50	25.00
Average monthly income (\$)	652.72	601.73	433.77	294.00	233.60
Employed (%)	22.70	9.30	13.60	13.60	14.30
Have less than high school certificate (%)	63.30	86.40	77.30	95.50	90.50

1 The unit was rented by someone other than the participant.

2 1=excellent; 2=very good; 3=good; 4=fair; 5=poor

3 Not all of these children were living with them.

4 This includes Saskatchewan social assistance, child benefits or employment supplements, federal child benefits, unemployment insurance, or training allowance, or social assistance that individuals received from their reserves.

Table 12.2: Relation to Reserve Housing¹

	Family* (n=22)	Adult Male (n=22)	Adult Female (n=22)	Male Youth (n=22)	Female Youth (n=21)
Did not have their own place on reserve (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	86.0	100.0
Had applied for housing on the reserve (%)	36.4	23.8	50.0	18.2	0.0
Would live on reserve if they had own house (%)	65.0	47.4	52.4	42.1	21.4

1 Percentages are of those who answered the questions. Some individuals did not answer every question.

age, and so these participants did not see their situation as unusual. Families and youth were more likely to live with other families, and therefore their average household size was slightly larger. Adult males were most likely to be living with other, unrelated individuals. Similarly, families and youth were more likely to be living in a detached house, row house, or duplex with a slightly larger number of bedrooms. Almost all of the units were rented by someone else living in the household. Family participants were most likely to have their own bedroom (rather than sleeping on the couch or the hallway), although many shared the

Table 12.3: Reasons Why Participants Did Not Apply or Receive Housing On-reserve (%)

No housing available	38.6
Not enough housing/families given priority	(21.5)
Band favouritism	(11.4)
Too young to apply	(5.7)
Not part of reserve community	27.2
Bad conditions on reserves	15.9
Personal reasons	10.2
No jobs or educational opportunities	8.0
Total	88.0

bedroom with their own children. About half of the male and female youth had their own bedrooms. Most of the adult males and females did not have their own bedroom and slept on the couch or in another room or shared with other non-family members.

Self-rated health was between very good and good, with male youth rating their health the best. The average age of participants was relatively young, with only two individuals over 50 years old. Except for family participants, most were single. Most of the participants had not grown up on a reserve. Almost all of the adults had children, although not all of them had children living with them. Except for the youth, many of whom received little income except what they received from family or through informal means, most participants' main source of income came from various kinds of social assistance sources, including Saskatchewan social assistance, child benefits or employment supplements, federal child benefits, unemployment insurance, training allowances, or social assistance individuals received from their reserves. Families had the highest average monthly income because many of those participants were eligible for social assistance for themselves and their children. Employment and education rates were low, with the lowest rates for adult males. Many of the youth were attending school at the time of the survey.

Relationship to Reserve Housing

Access to Reserve Housing

Almost all of the participants we interviewed indicated that they did not have their own place on-reserve (**Table 12.2**). Only two of the male youth said they had their own place, but in one case the youth's grandmother was leaving and had promised him her house. In other words, he was expecting to have his own place soon but did not actually have it at the time. The majority of individuals had not applied for housing on-reserve, although this varied between respondents. Youth were least likely to have applied for reserve housing, and many of them indicated that

Table 12.4: Unavailability of Housing

There's very limited housing available each year to reserve residents so you're like having 3-4 families, with 19-20 people living in a house and I think when you don't live at the reserve level or your Chief and Counsel are struggling to provide for on-reserve, I think, you know, that basically means that the off-reserve people are basically worse off than the band.

(Male head of family #0)

Because I needed a house out there but I still haven't gotten one so I decided to stay living with my ... Well, how does it go? I lived with my dad, then I lived with my sister for like, I lived with my sister for like 15 months and then I moved back with my dad and I couldn't stand my dad so I moved in with my cousin, and we get along good and we go half on everything.

(Female head of family #43)

And there's not, yah. On the reserve there's not that many houses. We need more houses and it's forced other people on [reserve] to live outside of the reserve 'cause there's families living in families. Like their kin and then their kin's, kins ... Yah. And they force them to live in Melfort, Kinistino and areas around the reserve and, you know, the cities too. It's up to the people if they wanna live on the reserve or live in P.A. ... But more houses would be better.

(Adult male #511)¹

Bands give houses to people with bigger families. Single people can't get a house.

(Adult female #36)

Well I tried for the past two years but I didn't get it 'cause there's like a big list now.

(Male youth #120)

[You] can't get a house unless, unless you have kids.

(Female youth #112)

¹ Questionnaire numbers were not consecutive.

Table 12.5: Band Favouritism

I could [apply] but I don't think they'd take me seriously. Because they would say like I'm not from there. It's strange. Even though I'm from there they would say "well you haven't lived here and like ever."

(Female head of family #56)

Like I was adopted growing up so I don't know a lot of my relatives and that and there's a process like to get housing you got to apply and got to be willing to live on the reserve. You gotta be living there for some time before they'll even give you any kind of financial help and that's just something I've never done.

(Adult female #18)

There's none. Well the way it is out there is you got the right family name you get a house ... You don't got the right family name you don't get nothing. That's the way it is out there. That's why I moved.

(Male youth #96)

they were too young. Adult males were slightly more likely to apply for housing than youth, followed by heads of families, and adult females (who were the most likely). At the same time, slightly less than half (48.9%) of the hidden homeless population in this survey indicated they would live on reserve if they had their own housing. In this context, it is important to pay some attention to the reasons individuals gave for not being able to obtain, or for not wishing to apply for,

Table 12.6: Do Not Feel Part of Reserve Community

‘Cause P.A. is like where I mostly grew up in. I was about eight or well nine years old. That’s where I mostly grew up so like I’ve been to my reserve. I’ve been to my town and now I never wanna go back there.

(Female head of family #99)

I don’t really like the reserve life to be honest. I don’t go with living out there ... I’m more of a city person. I grew up in the city, you know, but if it was my last resort I would move out but I, you know, I’m just not comfortable living out there.

(Adult male #54)

Yah, well I have friends but there’s no way I’m gonna go out to the reserve ... Cause it’s a reserve and it’s depressing and you have a totally different environment. Spend my all days watching the day go by.

(Adult male #1001)

I just don’t feel comfortable in a reserve. Although my family’s from there, you know, like ... I don’t know, I just don’t feel comfortable out there.

(Adult male #49)

‘Cause I don’t wanna live on my reserve. I like to be somewhere where there’s, where there people, lots of people because it pisses me off just sitting at home alone ... All bored and shit watching TV ... Well, well if you get to go out and go out and drink there’s that to do, there’s nothing else basically to do. There’s no Macs, there’s no Costco, there’s no basketball court.

(Male youth #103)

Because I’m used to living in town. I’m used to living in the city. I’m not used to living walking out on dirt roads all the time. Not really having anything to do, you know. Just walk around the reserve. That’s all I ever do when I’m there. It’s not very interesting and I don’t speak Cree. I try to get along with these people that speak Cree but they’re always speaking it and they just leave me out and I feel too bucked out when I’m there.

(Female youth #45)

housing on-reserve, and also why individuals would stay on-reserve if they had their own housing unit.

Reasons for Not Living On-reserve

Table 12.3 (page 196) lists all of the reasons participants gave to explain why they did not apply for housing on the reserve, or why they did not live on the reserve even though they had applied for housing. Twenty-one participants did not answer. For the remaining participants, their answer was put into only one category and, in general, the answers focused on one main reason. Where there were two reasons, we classified the answer according to the main reason. So, for example, in the quote, “I could get a place on there if I want. I just don’t wanna get one, it’s too boring up there and no jobs. I like this ‘cause I’m so used to the city” (adult male #9), the participant mentions employment, but his main emphasis is on liking the city more than the reserve. This quote was placed in the category “Not part of the reserve community.” There were very few quotes that could be placed in more than one category.

Table 12.7: Bad Conditions On-reserve

Because personally I don't think that reserve is the most stable place. They say the city is worse than the reserve, but I would disagree because there is more alcohol, more drugs and more abuse on the reserve, that I think that your kids could be exposed to. And in town my kids aren't exposed to violence, alcohol, drugs, smoking, nothing like that. And on a reserve, all the families out there. I don't drink and if I was to drink, my family would probably be at my house spending time drinking. So I don't think it is, I would never live on my reserve.

(Female head of family #72)

I heard the water and stuff is pretty bad over there so ... I don't how to go about so I didn't apply for a house.

(Adult male #82)

It doesn't make a good place and I don't want to leave my children in an environment like that.

(Adult female #30)

Not really 'cause it's kinda going down hill. Crazy things go on there It's going crazy. It used to be a nice place but now it's just like kinda run down.

(Male youth #127)

Because if you see all of the like people drinking around there. There, it's, I don't like, I personally don't like the reserve because of all of the, like all the stuff it has on it like, you know, like ... negativity. Like when people talk about it and they make fun of it.

(Female youth #108)

The unavailability of housing was the single most important reason (36.8%) individuals gave for not being able to live on their reserve. This was followed by not feeling like they belonged on-reserve (27.2%), bad conditions on reserves (15.9%), personal reasons (10.2%), and no jobs or education on-reserve (8.0%).

People gave a variety of reasons for not having housing on reserves. The largest proportion indicated that because there was a shortage of housing, large families were given priority (21.5%). This included adult males who had lost their housing when they broke up with their female partner. Housing was unavailable to them because the housing for single individuals was limited. Heads of families were most likely to identify this reason, but some individuals in every category mentioned it. Aspects mentioned by individuals are summarized in **Table 12.4** (page 197). **Participants recognized the difficulties bands faced in allocating housing in the context of severe housing shortages.** People living off-reserve, single people, or people with small families had less of a claim to band housing, according to these participants.

Related to this situation was the sense of a number of participants that band councils tended to favour some people over others. Some participant comments appear in **Table 12.5** (page 197). **Adult females and female heads of families** were most likely to make this comment, probably because they were most likely to have applied for housing at some point in the past. Several individuals also indicated that they were too young to apply for housing. Not surprisingly, most of these individuals were male or female youth or young heads of families.

Table 12.8: Personal Reasons/No Jobs or Education

I would say yes to the urban reserve but not to the northern reserve ... I wouldn't have a job. (Female head of family #56)
Me and my common-law we've been separated for like well maybe a month and a half, close to two months now so I've been struggling with this homelessness since then. (Adult male #25)
There's no work on the reserve either eh. You have to be a councillor or something, related to a councillor before you can get a job out there and when you do get a job out there like it only lasts for about a week or two. Just one cheque isn't much, eh. (Adult male #12)
Because my ex-husband lives in La Ronge and my other ex so it's, I feel more comfortable being in the city alone so that it's my private life. (Adult female #234)
My mom asked me to leave. (Female youth #34)

Participants gave a number of non-housing related reasons for not being able to live on-reserve (61.3%). The total number of these additional reasons was greater than the total number of housing-related reasons. The single largest category had to do with individuals not feeling as if they were part of the reserve community (27.2%). This included not speaking the language, having grown up in the city, and finding the reserve to be boring. Adult men made up almost half of this category, so **Table 12.6** (page 198) includes several of their responses. Male and female youth also mentioned these reasons, but adult females did not.

The next largest category of reasons, at 15.9%, concerned bad conditions on reserves. These reasons were most often mentioned by male and female youth, but individuals in every category mentioned them. **Table 12.7** (page 199) summarizes some of their comments. Individuals mentioned both social and physical conditions on reserves as reasons why they would not live there, even if they had their own housing. The second largest category of additional reasons had to do with preferring urban life, or not feeling like part of the reserve community.

Adult males and adult females were the most likely to list personal reasons. Male youth and heads of families did not give any reasons that fell into this category. In many cases, these reasons had to do with personal relationships that prevented individuals from returning to the reserve. However, some people also wished to stay away from reserves because of bad memories.

The unavailability of employment and higher levels of education comprised the smallest category of reasons individuals would not live on reserves. On the surface, this seems surprising because studies of why individuals move away from reserve often list education and employment as primary reasons. However, it is important to remember that a very small proportion of this population is employed, and many of the youth are in Prince Albert to finish high school. It makes sense that this would not be the main reason for living off the reserve.

Table 12.9: Reasons for Wanting to Live on the Reserve, if Housing Were Available

Family	Better Conditions
<p>Because if it is a house of my own my kids will be there. That would be okay, you know, 'cause it'd be nice for me to stay. But if I end up staying in someone else's place, you know, paying for this and paying for that, you're ending up paying for everything there for them and there is nothing there for you. It's like I'm doing at my sister's right now.</p>	<p>I guess I've always wondered about that whether I would go back. With so much of my health problems right now I think that I would be better off on the reserve and I did think about this after the place I live now. I asked my sister if there were any houses available and she said the were none ... I would probably move back if I had housing because of the quiet, the serenity, family. I have family out there. And probably get better assistance then I do in town.</p>
(Adult male #60)	(Female head of family #70)
<p>Definitely. Because I'm from there and got family there and it'd be my house.</p>	<p>Because I know I wouldn't have to worry, have extra worry about like living, I don't want to be like in a city with my kids. I wouldn't have to, you know, worry about, you know, traffic and, you know, break-and-enter or whatever. I wouldn't have to worry about that ... To have my own place basically.</p>
(Adult male #511)	(Female head of family #87)
<p>Because, I get so, there's so many of us sometimes at my mom's house and sometimes I wish I had my own house, cause if I did have my own house over there I wouldn't be here, I'd be over there with my kids, I have kids eh ... My kids are over there [reserve] ya with my mom ... Yup and that's, where I would be, if I had my own home.</p>	<p>I think it's a better environment for my kids. If I was to move on the reserve I wouldn't have to worry so much of kids not getting into drugs, the alcohol or, you know, having been robbed in your own home and stuff like that ... It's also quiet like you know like it's probably safe, yah they do a lot of drinking there but if you're on your own little world nobody bothers you. You basically just, you'll be okay. All you have to worry about is the people driving drunk and half of the time they don't do any of that anyway so and when they, if they're drinking they're not drinking on reserve. They're either out if town, like country bars or city or whatever, you know. It's better that they stay over there.</p>
(Adult female #10)	(Adult female #232)
<p>I would like that it's away from the city and a lot of my family is there ... And it would be a good place for my son to grow up</p>	<p>Because I feel like if I was to get out of, out of P.A., you know, it would be a lot easier for me because I wouldn't have to feel like I'm, I wouldn't have to feel like I'm still like, I wouldn't have to feel pressured, pressured into things any more, you know, like say friends, you know, people that try to come in pressuring me to doing drugs with them, you know. Stuff like that.</p>
(Female youth #116)	(Adult female #78)
	<p>Like to stay out in the reserve ... More isolated. Less trouble out there.</p>
	<p>(Male youth #64)</p>
	<p>I like it. It's like peaceful. It's not like the city is. Less people around there. There's no traffic. It's quiet.</p>
	(Male youth #120)

Table 12.8 (page 200) gives examples of participant responses having to do with these two categories.

Desire to Live on Reserve if Participants Had Their Own Housing

Of the ninety participants who gave an answer to the question, “If you had your own housing on-reserve, would you live there?” forty-four (48.9%) answered that they would. Not all of these individuals indicated why they would live on the reserve, but the available answers give some indication of what participants looked for from the reserve setting. A major theme was that if individuals had a place of their own, they would be able to live with family members. For some, both male and female, this meant that they would be able to live with their children. For others, it meant being closer to their family of origin. There was also a longing for a place of their own in these statements. Others saw conditions on reserves as providing a better place for both themselves and their children. In contrast to those who would not move to the reserve because of alcohol and drugs, some of these individuals saw reserve locations as a place where they could get away from these addictions. The answers emphasize the importance of understanding the variety of conditions on reserves and of not labelling reserves as homogeneous. Taken together, it seems clear that the housing situation on reserves has some effect on First Nations peoples’ experiences of hidden homelessness.

Conclusion

While First Nations homelessness in urban areas has been linked to the process of urbanization (Beavis et al. 1997; Distasio 2003; Golden 1999), there is very little work that explores whether the ability of First Nations individuals to access housing on-reserve affects rates of homelessness in urban areas. Perhaps this reflects erroneous assumptions that there is a continuous and inevitable out migration from reserves to cities, and that urbanization reflects the choices of individuals to live in cities rather than on reserves (Norris et al. 2002, 2003). The responses from our participants suggest that this is not universally the case, and that some individuals who are relying on friends and family to obtain shelter in Prince Albert would not be there if the housing situation on the reserve were better. According to participants, there is a need for more housing for families, but there is also a need for housing for individuals and couples without children.

The proportion of participants who said they would live on the reserve if they had housing there is significant. Forty-four of ninety individuals (48.9%) would like to live in their own place on the reserve. Clearly, expressed preferences do not always translate into behaviour. The first quote under “better conditions” in **Table 12.9** (page 201), for example, is by a woman who has hardly spent any time living on the reserve. This raises some questions about whether she would actually move out to the reserve and stay there. For other individuals, though, it seems quite likely that their hidden homeless situation would be alleviated by

more housing opportunities on the reserves. The literature on movement out of homelessness indicates that one element that might facilitate this change is the increased provision of subsidized or affordable housing.

In this paper, we have addressed mainly increased provision of housing on reserves. Our results suggest that this is important to participants, and this finding adds to the urgency of addressing the reserve housing situation. It has implications not only for reserve residents but also for the urban First Nations community.

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Endnotes

- 1 PAGC Urban has been involved in a variety of initiatives to address First Nations homelessness in Prince Albert (City of Prince Albert 2001, 2004; PAGC 2000).

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