

# Homelessness Policy in Yellowknife

## A Photovoice Project

**Moses Hernandez**

Jane Glasco Northern Fellow

August | 2015



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## **Moses Hernandez**

Jane Glassco Northern Fellow

Moses Hernandez was born and raised in Somba Ke/Yellowknife. He has completed a BA (Honours) in political science at St. Francis Xavier University and completed graduate courses in Arctic studies and polar law with a focus on indigenous rights and traditional knowledge, at universities in Finland and Iceland, respectively. He is also an alumnus of Dechinta Bush University from their first cohort. Some of his research was recently published (2012) in a northern edition of *Pimatisiwin: Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, where he looked at some of the complexities of indigenous knowledge incorporation in government policy.

His previous work experience includes research and policy analyst for the Government of the Northwest Territories, and he continues to work as a residential support worker for a local NGO part-time. He believes in giving back to the community and volunteers for various NGO's including the Yellowknife Ski Club, Ecology North, and a local community garden collective.

### **Fellowship Focus**

As of September 2015, Moses will be undertaking an education in architecture at Dalhousie University. He is really excited to focus on housing policy, design, and traditional knowledge in his research and design process. He hopes that the Fellowship will be able to give him a more grounded perspective and deeper insight into complex housing policy issues that are most significant and pressing to northern communities, including his own.

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## **Acknowledgements**

A heartfelt appreciation to my family and friends for encouraging and supporting me to pursue my dreams no matter how challenging the road may be. Thank you to the Gordon Foundation for the incredible opportunities and experiences I have been provided through the Fellowship, and for the doors that have been opened as a result. Masicho to the co-researchers of the photovoice project, for opening up your hearts and trusting me and others into your lives and community, that many have for too long misunderstood. I have learned so much about resilience, trust, camaraderie and sharing from our time together. Thank you for sharing your stories.

## Introduction

At approximately 20,000 residents, the city of Yellowknife contains almost half of the population of the Northwest Territories (N.W.T.). The majority of N.W.T.'s homeless population also live in Yellowknife. The per capita homeless population rate in Yellowknife is significantly larger than almost all Canadian municipalities (the approximate average homeless rate for a Canadian municipality is one per cent, for Yellowknife it is five per cent). Although Aboriginal People (Dene, Inuit or Métis) make up roughly half of the population of the N.W.T., they comprise between 90 per cent and 95 per cent of Yellowknife's visible homeless population.<sup>1</sup> The literature also suggests that a significant number of Yellowknife's homeless population suffers from various types of psychological and/or physical trauma, addictions, and mental health issues.<sup>2</sup> Also, despite the fact that the significant amount of visible homelessness in Yellowknife is considered a relatively recent phenomenon, the highly visible and cyclical nature of homelessness in Yellowknife suggest that the current policy and practice has not been successful.

## Purpose

Recent case studies on homelessness in Yellowknife and the N.W.T. (See table 1) highlight the need and urgency to increase housing supply in Yellowknife in terms of social housing, transitional housing and supported permanent housing as well as make improvements to the current emergency shelter services.<sup>3</sup> As the *Housing First*<sup>4</sup> model of housing gains traction across North America, as an alternative to traditional emergency shelter or transitional housing approaches in that it provides immediate access to permanent housing, local advocacy groups such as the Yellowknife Homelessness Coalition (a multi-stakeholder advocacy network) and the City of Yellowknife's Community Advisory Board have been focusing their efforts towards funding housing projects in the city based on the *Housing First* model. Under this context, this policy paper attempts to build on that policy discourse by utilizing a photovoice method of research to incorporate and present the personal stories, narratives and expe-

riences of some of Yellowknife's homeless. In doing so, the intent is to offer insight on the importance and relevance of using participatory action research as a possible method to develop public policy, particularly in a policy field that ought to measure success based on how well the complex needs of the clientele are being addressed. While hidden homelessness and youth homelessness in Yellowknife is also a growing concern as discussed in the literature, it is not addressed in this paper.

## Organization of the Policy Paper

In conducting an analysis of homelessness policies in Yellowknife, the purpose of this policy paper is four-fold. First, through a brief examination of the academic literature on homelessness, insight is gained on some of the root causes of indigenous homelessness. Second, the description and assessment of Yellowknife's homelessness policy field provides the context to further guide policy development in this area. Third, in order to understand some of the first-hand lived experiences of indigenous homelessness in Yellowknife, the photography and the findings from the photo voice research project conducted with homeless co-researchers in Yellowknife will be shared. Fourth, as a result of the overall assessment of the research presented, policy recommendations will be proposed.

## Literature Review

### *Defining the Problem*

There are many pathways into and out of homelessness.<sup>5</sup> The lived experiences of homeless Aboriginal Peoples are diverse, and as a result there isn't one solution to homelessness. This research project recognizes that there is no single accepted definition of homelessness. Instead, there are diverse experiences of homelessness such as *at-risk*, *hidden*, *visible*, *sheltered* and *supportively housed*.<sup>6</sup> These various experiences, which relate to varying degrees of housing, also relate to a position on a housing continuum. Homelessness can also be referred to temporally as *episodic* or *chronic*, where absence of permanent or adequate housing is either a short-term or a long-term experience (over several years), respectively.

1 The statistics and composition of Yellowknife's homeless population were compiled by Nick Falvo in his 2011 report: "Homelessness in Yellowknife: An Emerging Social Challenge." (Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press, 2011).

2 Yellowknife Homelessness Coalition. "Yellowknife Homelessness Report Card 2008" (Yellowknife, NWT: Yellowknife Homelessness Coalition, 2009); Abele, F., Falvo, N., Hache, A. 2010. "Homeless in the Homeland: A Growing Problem for Indigenous People in Canada's North." *Parity*. Vol 29. pg. 21-23; Falvo, N. 2011. "Homelessness in Yellowknife: An Emerging Social Challenge." Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press. Judie Bopp, 2007. "Being Homeless is Getting to be Normal: A Study of Women's Homelessness in the Northwest Territories." Yellowknife, NWT: YWCA Yellowknife and the Yellowknife Women's Society.

3 See Table 1 for a simple summary of this northern homelessness literature. It highlights the research conducted by Nick Falvo (2011) Julia Christensen (2012), and Judie Bopp (2007).

4 One of the main tenets of the Housing First approach is that once permanent housing is unconditionally provided, homeless individuals are better able to overcome personal challenges (including addictions) that contributed to their homelessness.

5 Bird et al. 2010. Cited in Patrick, C. 2014. *Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada: a Literature Review*. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press; As the cited literature uses both terms indigenous and aboriginal, this paper uses both terms interchangeably.

6 Falvo, N. 2011. "Homelessness in Yellowknife: An Emerging Social Challenge". Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.

**Table I. Sample of Previous Findings and Recommendations of NWT Homelessness Research**

Author	Findings	Recommendations
Falvo, N. (2011)	-Shelters in YK are overcrowded -Housing options are limited in Yellowknife for social, transitional and supportive living housing -GNWT funding to shelter agencies in YK are insufficient, and in some cases disproportionate between agencies	1.Create a Homelessness Secretariat 2.Accountability to the YK Homelessness Coalition 3.Develop shelter standards 4.Create more and affordable supported living for homeless 5.Create a public task force on substance use
Christensen, J. (2011)	-Neo-colonial history -Uneven economic development -Rapid socio-cultural change -Dependency on government for housing and Income Support -Housing (in)security caused by housing and corrections histories	1. Develop trauma informed healing interventions 2. expanded treatment services in NWT 3.Address core housing need 4. Increase supportive housing options 5. Child-Welfare Strategy and supportive/comprehensive Case Management for homeless

The literature revealed that there are many concepts useful in understanding the various homelessness experiences. Having said that, in order to provide a better context to homelessness in Yellowknife, and bring to light an appropriate set of policy responses as a result, the main concepts explored in the research that follows, relate to indigenous homelessness and visible homelessness.

*Indigenous Homelessness*

Research on indigenous homelessness reveals various social and economic (structural) factors. As in other parts of the world, the legacy of colonialism has had a negative impact on indigenous people in the N.W.T. in significant ways. The devastating legacies of these colonial policies and practices include, but are not limited to:

- Residential schools;
- The child and family services system;
- Displacement from traditional lands;
- Imposition of Western knowledge and value systems; and,
- Marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems and traditions.

In the social health research literature, because the above-mentioned impacts are both structural and system-

ic on indigenous people’s health and well-being, they are referred to as the social determinants of health. Under this framework, these impacts have all served to devastate indigenous families, communities and cultural traditions and contribute to the overall poor health and wellness outcomes of indigenous peoples relative to the non-indigenous population in Canada. The literature also revealed that indigenous homelessness in particular is commonly associated with mental illness and addictions. As a result of the colonial legacy endured by indigenous people and the poor health conditions that emerged, it is this context that gives rise to an over-representation of indigenous people in the homeless population.<sup>7</sup> Research has shown that several other factors directly contribute to indigenous homelessness and create a “compounding disadvantage;”<sup>8</sup> these will be explored under the concepts of urban migration and “spiritual homelessness.”<sup>9</sup>

*Rural to Urban Migration and the effects of Spiritual Homelessness*

The rate of indigenous people migrating to urban centres from smaller rural or home communities is increasing at a rapid rate; there are more indigenous people that live in an urban setting than in a rural one in Canada.<sup>10</sup> The impact of this process is that individuals leave their social and support networks. The urban indigenous population also faces

7 McCallum, K. and Isaac, D. 2011. “Feeling home: Culturally responsive approaches to aboriginal homelessness.” Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia and The Centre for Native Policy Research Vancouver, Canada; A. Leach. 2010. “The Roots of Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada,” *Parity*, 23 no. 9, pg. 12-13.  
 8 Julia Christensen (2011) utilized this concept to explain several key themes that emerged from her findings in Christensen, J. 2011. “Homeless in a homeland: housing (in)security and homelessness in Inuvik and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories.” PhD dissertation, Department of Geography, McGill University. However I use it to specifically explain the effects of urban migration and challenges associated.  
 9 Spiritual Homelessness is also a concept explored by Julia Christensen in Christensen, J. 2011, and 2013 and in other work.  
 10 DeVerteuil, G. and Wilson, K. 2010. “Reconciling Indigenous Need with the Urban Welfare State? Evidence of Culturally-Appropriate Services and Spaces for Aboriginals in Winnipeg, Canada.” *Geoforum*. 41 No. 3, pg. 498-507.



unique social and economic challenges, including lower education levels, higher unemployment rates, and the effects of interpersonal violence and racism<sup>11</sup>. All of these factors put them at a significant disadvantage when seeking employment and housing. Therefore, the combined effect of loss of social support networks and their socio-economic disadvantage increases the probability of becoming homeless. In the N.W.T., the literature revealed that the economic boom as a result of resource development projects (for example, diamond mines), the corrections system, and the lack of adequate housing in smaller communities has also contributed to the rural to urban migration.<sup>12</sup>

Understanding the indigenous concept of *home* is also essential to understand the “compounding disadvantage” of indigenous homelessness. The concept of home, “a social, psychological space, not just a house as a physical structure,”<sup>13</sup> carries different meanings for different people and is strongly affected by culture and identity. “Spiritual homelessness”<sup>14</sup> is a concept from Australian literature<sup>15</sup> that recognizes separation from traditional land, family and kinship networks, has a negative impact on identity, and consequently, health and well-being. The loss of connection to a one’s community, heritage, cultural practices and traditional knowledge, which has a direct influence on self-esteem. Therefore, the experience of homelessness is more than a lack of housing.<sup>16</sup>

### Discrimination

As mentioned earlier, Aboriginal people make up the majority of those experiencing homelessness in Yellowknife.<sup>17</sup> Public hostility and discrimination towards the homeless population in Yellowknife reflect a common misconception (paradoxically) of both individual level factors that result in homelessness, and another based on racial stereotypes. However, research cited cautions against pathologizing the individual as well as perpetuating racist stereotypes and instead point to the need to understand the concept of *intergenerational trauma*. According to Menzies,<sup>18</sup> there are

broader “macro-traumas” that indigenous people are subjected to and may contribute to homelessness, including:

- The popularization of negative Aboriginal stereotypes through the mainstream media.
- Social policies that perpetuate “colonialization” of Aboriginal Peoples at individual, family and community levels.
- A lack of support for holistic programs and services targeting Aboriginal needs.
- A lack of support for community self-determination.

### N.W.T. Housing Policy Historical Context

The N.W.T. also has a long history of inadequate housing and lack of supply. The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) began a colonial housing and planning policy of re-settlement of communities, which occurred across the N.W.T., including the Eastern Arctic prior to Nunavut. Between 1956 and 1965, DIAND provided a number of small houses for sale to Inuit families in the N.W.T., under the *Eskimo Housing Loan Program*. In an effort to centralize Dene and Inuit families into settlements in order to administer government programs such as health, education and welfare assistance, the housing that was provided resulted in overcrowding, construction and design problems, that is, it did not meet the environmental and cultural lifestyle and needs of the occupants.<sup>19</sup>

The house designs ranged from one-room units to three-room units. The houses had to be purchased and few Inuit could afford even the smallest of the designs.<sup>20</sup> In present-day N.W.T., the first housing assistance to Dene/Métis comprised building materials to help with the construction of cabins. These required local materials to complete. Prefab “welfare houses” units were supplied in certain Dene settlements. In general, with limited supply, the high costs of construction and maintenance, affordability became a major issue. There were also limited econom-

11 Brandon, J. and Peters, E. 2014. “Moving to the City: Housing and Aboriginal Migration to Winnipeg.” *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*. Winnipeg, Manitoba.  
 12 Christensen, J. 2011. “Homeless in a homeland: housing (in)security and homelessness in Inuvik and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories.” PhD dissertation, Department of Geography, McGill University.  
 13 Hulchanski, D. et al. eds. 2009. *Finding Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada*. (Toronto: Cities Centre, University of Toronto, 2009). Pg. 2.  
 14 Also a concept utilized by Julia Christensen in her research in the N.W.T. in 2013.  
 15 Memmott, P., and Chambers, C. (2010). “Indigenous Homelessness in Australia: An Introduction.” *Parity*, 23(9), 8-11., cited in Patrick, C. 2014. *Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada: a Literature Review*. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.  
 16 McCallum, K. and Isaac, D. 2011. “Feeling home: Culturally responsive approaches to aboriginal homelessness.” Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia and The Centre for Native Policy Research Vancouver, Canada. Pg. 8.  
 17 See Falvo, 2011; Yellowknife Homelessness Coalition. 2009.  
 18 Menzies, P. 2009. “Homeless Aboriginal Men: Effects of Intergenerational Trauma,” in Hulchanski, D. et al. eds. 2009. *Finding Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada*, Toronto: Cities Centre, University of Toronto, 2009.  
 19 Pin Matthews Architects. 1997. *Planning Study of Native Northern Communities*. Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.  
 20 Logsdon, H. and Seto, D. 1992. “Housing and Northern Lifestyles: an Historical Overview” in Riewe, R. and Oakes, J. 1992. *Human Ecology: Issues in the North*. (1992). Canadian Circumpolar Institute. Vol. 1, No. 30. Pg. 82.

ic opportunities in the new settlements, which contributed to high and chronic levels of welfare dependency. Problems related to dependency are still prevalent today.

For both Dene and Inuit, assistance expanded into the *Northern Rental Housing Program* in 1968, as many families could not afford to purchase even with a loan. The initial rental and purchase programs eventually expanded to include homeownership assistance. The *Eskimo Rental Housing Program* and the *Northern Rental Program* were the first major attempts to deliver social housing in the N.W.T. The program was based on rent geared to income, and units ranged in size from one room to three bedrooms, and were provided according to family size, though the largest houses supplied were less than 700 square feet.<sup>21</sup>

Also in 1968, the administrative responsibility was transferred to the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT), which continued to administer the program until 1973. During this period, the policy and direction of the program remained under the control of the Federal government.<sup>22</sup> In 1971, the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation (NWT HC) was created.

Since all of the housing provided was rental, the GNWT required some form of local property management at the community level. The Northern Rental Housing Program authorized the establishment of Local Housing Organizations (LHOs) to help administer the program by collecting rents and operating the day-to-day maintenance of the units. Therefore, the LHOs are responsible for delivering social housing on behalf of the NWT HC and now exist in almost every community.<sup>23</sup> In Yellowknife, the LHO is known as the Yellowknife Housing Authority. Today, the NWT HC serves the entire population of the N.W.T., whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. It also receives substantial funding from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). The N.W.T. Legislative Assembly's Special Committee on Housing tabled its report in June 1985. It led to a new approach to housing delivery for NWT HC that emphasized community and economic development and mutual accountability. This was coupled with a major expansion of the Homeownership Assistance Program based on preferences for ownership rather than rentals.

In 1993, the federal government froze new spending on social housing and stopped its off-reserve, Aboriginal-spe-

cific housing assistance. Very little if any new Aboriginal-specific social housing has been built for non-reserve Aboriginal households since 1993. The N.W.T. has no "on-reserve housing" administered by the new Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), leaving N.W.T. Aboriginal people out of federal Aboriginal housing funding. Instead, funding for northern housing was provided through specific projects with unique funding arrangements, or through the NWT HC's programs.<sup>24</sup> In 1997, the NWT HC gained responsibility for all the administration and management of housing in the N.W.T. Negotiations with CMHC in 1996 resulted in an agreement being signed to transfer the management and administration of all federal cost-shared social housing in the Northwest Territories. Under the new agreement, the N.W.T. received social housing funding from the Government of Canada for each year, based on agreed 1995/1996 levels. This funding, made over a 40 year period, will expire on a staggered basis until it completely expires in 2038.<sup>25</sup>

The high cost of housing, poor housing conditions, and inadequate supply in the N.W.T., along with the decrease in government funding for housing over the past two decades, are structural conditions that contribute to the homelessness challenges in the N.W.T. today. The private housing market is almost non-existent in smaller communities. There is some work opportunities, but the community economies depend upon income from a variety of sources, such as harvesting, the sale of furs, crafts, etc. The NWT HC owns most of the housing stock, and this is administered through local housing organizations (LHOs). Housing in small communities is expensive to maintain and will continuously require subsidy to make up for the low incomes and the cost of operating and maintaining the unit. Therefore, dependence on social housing and social assistance payments, particularly in small indigenous communities, has become the norm – which is in conflict with self-determining principles.<sup>26</sup>

The designs and policies, ill-suited to their environmental and cultural context, are in direct conflict with the users. The mismatch of euro-centric policy and planning to northern indigenous communities reveals an imposition of one knowledge system over another. In addition, forced relocation and community settlement, displacement, residential schooling, the introduction of social welfare transfers and other colonial measures

21 *ibid*, 83.

22 *ibid*.

23 A wide variety of units was built under the Northern Rental Program. See the appendix in Logsdon, H. and Seto, D. 1992.

24 Christensen, J. and Andrew, P. "They don't let us look after each other like we used to": *Reframing Indigenous Homeless Geographies as Home/Journeying in the Northwest Territories, Canada*. Accessed at <http://ion.uwinnipeg.ca/~epeters/Workshop%20Papers/Christensen%20Andrew.pdf> April 22, 2015.

25 Government of the Northwest Territories. *NWT Housing Corporation. Corporate History*. <http://nwthc.gov.nt.ca/node/8> Accessed June 22, 2015.

26 See Christensen and Andrew (2015) for in-depth analysis of the social housing system conflicting with traditional indigenous value-systems.

disrupted relations between individuals, families, and entire communities. Furthermore, addictions and substance abuse, poor mental health conditions, increased domestic violence and crime rates in the N.W.T. have also risen dramatically as a result of the economic boom in the N.W.T. from resource development activity.<sup>27</sup> These negative outcomes are also recognized as contributing factors of homelessness. As a result, these externally created processes of broad social change have created long standing difficulties for the Indigenous peoples in the N.W.T.

**Table 2. Major Homelessness Themes and Issues Identified in the Literature**

Themes	Issues Identified
<b>Socio-Economic Conditions</b>	-Lack of education -High unemployment -Higher proportion of people that are living with mental health conditions and disabilities
<b>Emergency Shelter</b>	-Understaffed and overcrowded -Emergency shelter is not able to respond to the high needs of the homeless population, due to the lack of specialized training -Current services for homeless people are limited
<b>Social Assistance</b>	-Disincentive to work, dependence on social assistance -Month-to-month reporting to social assistance agency is onerous on clients -Can be disqualified from 30-90 days based on numerous factors which can quickly increase arrears of clients as a result
<b>Housing</b>	-Inadequate housing conditions -Overcrowding -Construction and design problems -Lack of funding for social housing -Lack of affordable housing -Intrusive social housing system -Arrears/ Debt to Landlord or Government -Institutional discrimination -No tenant protection in transitional housing ( <i>Residential Tenancies Act</i> does not apply to transitional housing); eviction at the discretion of agency
<b>Criminal Justice System</b>	-Cycle of incarceration and homelessness -Insufficient discharge planning and ineffective rehabilitation
<b>Spiritual Homelessness / Breakdown in Relationships and Social Support Network</b>	-Disconnection from community and "home" -Family violence -Rural to urban migration (from small community to the city) -Residential school trauma -Lack of an addictions treatment facility in the N.W.T.

## The Yellowknife Context

Yellowknife (or 'Sombak'e', which in the local Dene dialect means 'Money Place') is the capital city, and the largest community in the Northwest Territories.

**Population** = approximately 20,000.

**Demographics** = ethnically and culturally diverse. The majority of the population are of European descent, and there are large minorities of indigenous Aboriginal (Dene, Metis, and Inuit) and Asian groups.

**Economy** = largest employer is the Government of the NWT, and is the hub of mining, industry, tourism for the Territory. Average personal (employment) income (2012) is \$66,983. Average for the Regional Centres (2012) is \$55, 137, and \$39,912 for the rest of the Territory.

**Services** = major centre for government, banking, health, and education services.

**Geography** = 62 degrees latitude, in the sub-arctic surrounded by Canadian shield.

**Climate** = sub-arctic climate, low precipitation on average with very long and cold winters, and short mild to warm summers.

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellowknife>; <http://www.statsnwt.ca/labour-income/income/index.html>

The **cost of living** is higher in Yellowknife than in the rest of the Territory, and this is mainly due to high housing costs (driven up as a result of low vacancy rates and limited supply). While the average income of a Yellowknife resident is significantly higher than the Territorial average, low to middle-income earners in the city have limited options for housing.

Falvo's 2011 report on homelessness in Yellowknife<sup>28</sup> revealed the city's emergency shelters are crowded and understaffed, while transitional housing and independent living support units are underfunded. Falvo also highlighted that the limited number of public housing units makes it almost impossible for single adults to receive a public housing unit.

27 Abele, F., Falvo, N. & Hache, A. 2010. "Homeless in the Homeland: A Growing Problem for Indigenous People in Canada's North." *Parity*.

28 Falvo, N. 2011. "Homelessness in Yellowknife: An Emerging Social Challenge". Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.

**Table 2. Non-Market Housing Options in Yellowknife**

Emergency Shelters
<p>The <i>Salvation Army</i> Emergency Shelter for men sleeps 20 men a night on mats, 20 on bunk beds and up to 10 on the floor of its cafeteria.</p> <p>The YWCA operates 5 emergency units for adults with children, within the Rockhill apartment building.</p> <p>The YWCA also operates the Alison McAteer House as an emergency shelter for women and children fleeing violence, with 12 beds.</p> <p>The <i>Side Door Youth Centre</i> has a dedicated space in their new transitional housing facility (Hopes Haven) with 10 beds for emergency situations for youth aged 16-24.</p>
Transitional Housing
<p>The <i>Side Door Youth Centre</i> has 10 rooms for tenants in their new transitional housing facility (Hopes Haven) for youth aged 16-24. In addition to housing, tenants receive support such as tenancy skills training and job preparation.</p> <p>The Bailey House for men, operated by the <i>Salvation Army</i>, has 32 beds in self-contained units, with staff present 24/7 that offer a supported living environment.</p> <p>The YWCA Rockhill complex has 27 units for families, and supports include crises support, life skills, and tenancy skill development.</p> <p>The YWCA operates Lynn's Place, a new transitional housing complex for women and children fleeing violence, and it contains 18 self-contained suites (apartments).</p>
Public Housing
<p>In Yellowknife, much of the housing is privately owned or market rental units. Public housing, on the other hand, is inadequate.</p> <p>The public housing stock in Yellowknife comprises mainly two or more bedrooms. Units for single people are prioritized for adults over 60 or for those with disabilities. There are 297 social housing units in Yellowknife, rent-geared to income.</p>

**Table 3. NWT Housing Corporation Homelessness Funding and Supports**

NWT HC Program	Homelessness Funding/Supports	Applicable to Yellowknife Organizations/Residents
Homelessness Assistance Fund	Emergency one-time funding to assist a household in gaining access to housing. Funding can be accessed for travel assistance for a person to return to their home community or another community where they will no longer be homeless.	Yes
Small Community Homelessness Fund	The goal of the fund is to provide N.W.T. communities (excluding Yellowknife) with funding for projects that address shelter and support needs for homeless individuals.	No
Shelter Enhancement Fund	Funding to shelters and homelessness agencies for capital upgrades or the purchase of equipment required for their operations.	Yes
Northern Pathways to Housing	To operate transitional housing for residents in 4 small communities. Renovate an existing unit to configure it into four single occupancy type rooms (secured) with a common kitchen and washroom facility. Provide on-going funding for operating costs for the unit including utilities and maintenance, some supplies, and support workers/case worker staffing (annual \$70,000 per community).	No
Housing First	The NWT HC and other GNWT departments sit as members on the City of Yellowknife's Community Advisory Board, which has created a plan to end homelessness in Yellowknife using Housing First intervention. The NWT HC is exploring how this model could be implemented in the NWT.	Yes



# PHOTOVOICE

## What is Photovoice?

Photovoice is a participatory action research method commonly utilized as a health promotion/prevention tool for personal and community change. First introduced by Wang and Burris in 1994,<sup>29</sup> Photovoice has developed as an empowering methodology that allows individuals to reflect upon their strengths and main concerns of their community that can motivate change to their circumstances. It can also provide vital and accurate information from marginalized groups. The final important component is that Photovoice must include a stage of communication and dialogue with those at the policy level in order to effect structural change. Photovoice has three main theoretical strands: empowerment education, feminist theory and documentary photography. Starting with change at the individual level, transforming perceptions through self-reflection, and then as a group through group discussions, change at a community level may be recognized, and finally as mentioned earlier, change through policies.<sup>30</sup>

## Why Photovoice?

The purpose of the Photovoice project was to give voice to Aboriginal experiences of homelessness in Yellowknife. Since the research involves a considerably marginalized group that routinely experiences discrimination and with many also suffering from addictions and psychological or physical trauma, it was important to utilize a method of research and philosophy that was participatory and accessible as well as empowering.<sup>31</sup> Within this context, before people agreed and consented to participate in this project, it was important to communicate that they would be equal partners in the process: my job was to facilitate and co-ordinate and their roles were the most important, to communicate their experiences to the public. Their co-participation in the research process was essential to ensure their lived experiences and stories were being conveyed, and it was their voices being heard. The potential of this dialectical, participatory, and educational experience, to contribute to effective public policy related to homelessness is immense. These points will be raised in more detail in the findings and discussion.

29 Wang et al. 2000. "Who Knows the Streets as well as the Homeless? Promoting Personal and Community Action through Photovoice." *Health Promotion Practice*. January 2000. Vol. 1, No. 1, pg. 81-89.

30 Ibid.

31 Wang et al. 2000 cautioned that not including a public policy communication component as part of a photovoice research project may in fact cause more harm and further objectify an already objectified/discriminated group of people—as there are no intentions to raise awareness and improve conditions through public policy discussions and dialogue with key stakeholders.



## Methodology

The first step in the process was recruitment of participants. Several afternoons were spent at the Day Shelter in Yellowknife in early February 2014 to meet and get to know some of the clientele and to make connections. At that time, the Executive Director was interviewed regarding the project, homelessness, and potential participants. After spending several days at the Day Shelter, to meet, connect, and build trust with some of the users, the decision was made to wait and commence the project in the summer. At that time, the Day Shelter was set to close down due to the fact that the funding contract had not been renewed with the organization that was operating it. A new contract and new Day Shelter was not planned to begin operations until early fall 2014.

In July 2014, participants were selected through random meetings on the streets in downtown Yellowknife, where many homeless individuals can be found throughout the day and night. After introducing the project to at least 30 people, 12 people agreed to participate and signed consent forms, and photo release forms were provided to participants as well. Several questions were posed to the co-researchers in order to focus their photography: What are some of the positive (happy) things about your everyday experience? What are some of the negative (unhappy) things? It was important to keep the instructions simple, open, and non-judgmental in order to allow a more natural process to emerge. Of the 12 participants, ten of them were suffering from addictions, nine of whom were open about abusing alcohol, and one participant indicated addiction to crack-cocaine. Two of the participants expressed that they do not have any current addictions issues, but take medication for psychiatric conditions. Two people were staying at the Centre for Northern Families (Women's Shelter) on a long-term basis (several years). One person was a resident of the Salvation Army Mental Health Supportive Housing Program. Two participants were a couple that lived in an apartment they rented using a combination of disability payments and income support to make the rent. The other participants were either staying at the Emergency Shelter at Salvation Army, or sleeping at their camp ("tent city") set up in the outskirts of the city. An initial meeting regarding the Photovoice project premise, method and process ensured that the participants understood fully the project and the expectations. Instructions were given on camera use, basic photography, and a date and time were arranged to meet to collect the cameras and to meet as a group to discuss the developed pictures. After retrieving cameras from 10 people, only six

participants showed up for the first focus group discussion. A second set of cameras was distributed a few days after our first focus group session. This time another 12 cameras were distributed, nine to the original group, and to three new people. After these cameras were collected, and the film developed, the second and final focus group session took place. It was also an opportunity to prepare for the larger public exhibition and policy workshop that would involve an open discussion with strangers (the general public as well as policy makers involved in the areas of homelessness).

During the second round of picture-taking, the following questions were posed as a result of the first focus group discussions of photographs: What are some of the most important things in your life? What are some of the things you want to change? What is the story that you want to tell to the public? What do you want people to see and know about how you live?

At each focus group session, the developed pictures were pinned up on the wall for an open discussion. In order to stimulate the conversation, the question was asked: "Why did you choose to take this particular picture?"

The two-week process of taking pictures and having two focus group sessions was an experience that culminated in a final public policy workshop session. At this final public event, only four of the participants had shown up – and approximately 30 members of the public, NGO staff, interested public, and policy makers from several different departments, and levels of government participated. After a brief introduction of the project, the floor was opened to the participants to share their experience and tell their story directly to the policy makers. Despite some of the participants' initial anxiety about speaking to the large group, a very honest, articulate and engaging discussion took place, and it was the participants' first-hand lived experience, and their voices, that were able to transcend their socio-economic and marginalized position to get their story across in a deliberate public policy forum. Therefore, this particular Photovoice project succeeded in completing the three main tenets of the Photovoice technique.

## Themes

Several themes emerged as a result of the group discussions and follow-up interviews that were conducted. The quotes are grouped under the different theme headings. A discussion will follow.

### **Theme 1: Negative associations with home community/disconnection**

“I had to escape my abusive husband. Back home I was living 20 years of hell.”

“Bad memories if we go back home.”

“I had problems with some people. There’s nothing for me there anymore.”

“I was starting to get angry all the time, rude, abusive-even to the elders, especially when I’m drinking, so I needed to change, so I left. But here in Yellowknife, it has opened many doors, there is lots of support, lots of people to talk with here, I see many different counselors, and each one opens new doors.”

“I had to leave to get away from my ex-wife.”

### **Theme 2: Strong attachment and support between homeless peers**

“I could try to make other friends, but I fit in with the [street] crowd, they are my people. People on the street know what I’m going through, culturally, spiritually, and emotionally.”

“We have a camaraderie.”

“They know when I’m not drinking and they respect that, they don’t ask me to have a shot.”

“We have to look out for each other for protection.”

“We have a dream that one day one of us will win the lottery and we’ll all live in one home.”

“At tent city we live communally. We share with each other.”

### **Theme 3: Mistrust/disrespect between agency staff and clients**

“I’m not a kid. I don’t need to be ordered around. They look over my shoulder. I know how to clean up and do chores; they don’t need to always tell me. I’m not stupid.”

“I don’t like having to sleep here. I get treated like I’m an alcoholic. But I’m not like those guys. I do drink once in a while, but I sip and I do it by myself so nobody bothers me, not to get hammered. I get frustrated when [staff] don’t respect me, then I get angry.”

“I had a bunk bed because I was doing productive choice, and then I came back and they removed my things and told me I had lost my bunk, but they were wrong. They made a mistake but didn’t apologize. I’m still mad about that.”

“I lost respect for them. After a couple of things they did, I can’t forgive them. I won’t go back there. I tried but it didn’t work out for me.”

“[staff person] really didn’t like me and wanted me out of there so [they] made sure I was gone, but I didn’t even do anything wrong. I was blamed for something I didn’t do to get me kicked out.”

### **Theme 4: Outreach Worker/Work**

“We need somebody to come to us where we are and check on us, to see what we need, and can even go to our campsite.”

“We need a witness on the street.”

“If I stay sober and finish school I would like to help others. Going to the streets to express my thoughts and ideas, I know that I can encourage people to change because I did it.”

### **Theme 5: Addictions**

“This is where we meet up, our gathering spot, and I like to wait here so that I can see who’s coming out of the liquor store or get someone to go for me.”

“This is where I stash my things, my bottles, and when I have to I use the washroom there.”

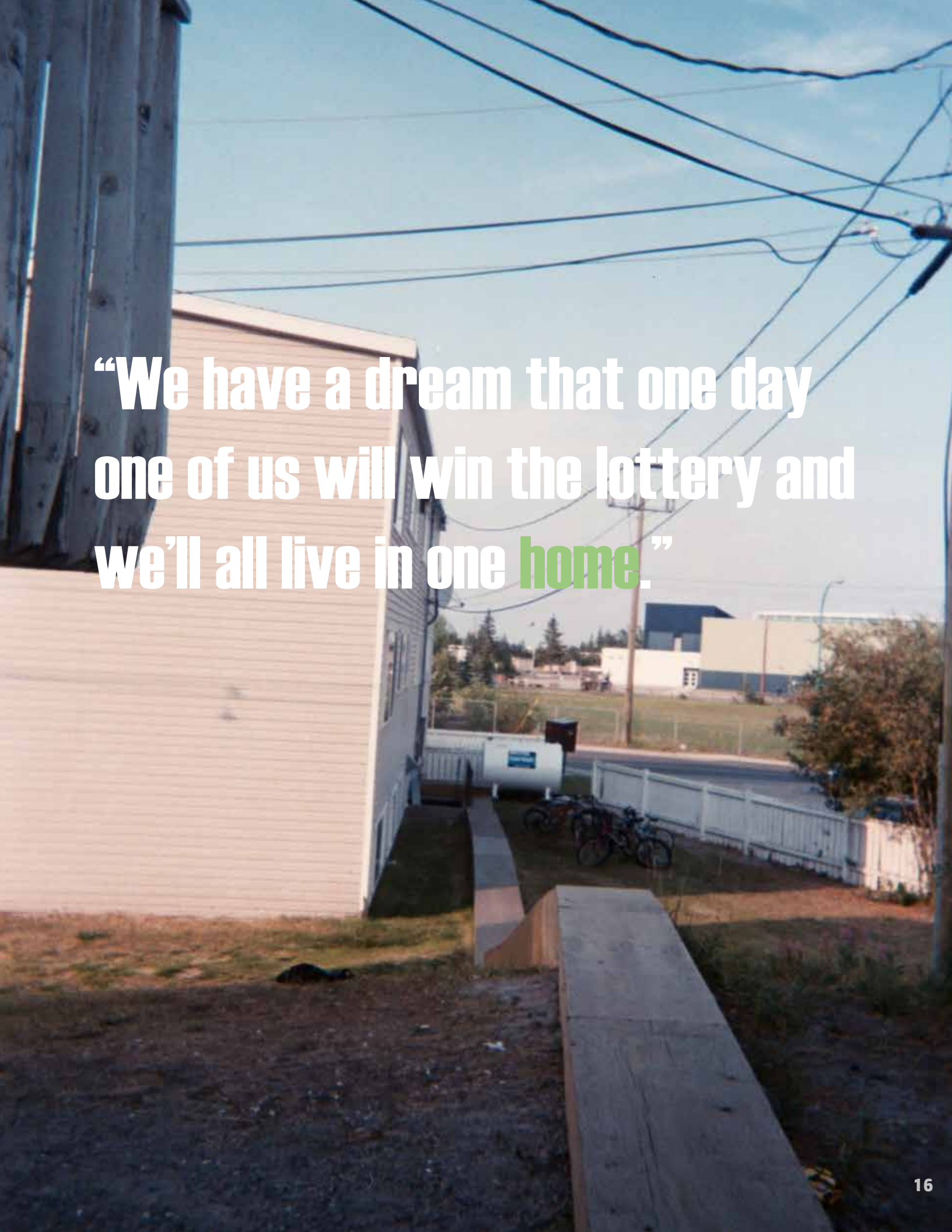
“I drink to get bombed.”

“I spent all my residential school payment on booze.”

“I used alcohol to escape reality, I just wanted to forget. My drinking escalated, started drinking hairspray and even hand sanitizer. And the more I drank the more medical problems I got.”

“I came to town to take courses. I didn’t even last one day, I ended up having too much fun and got caught up drinking and went downhill from there. It’s been a few years now.”

“I’ve been in and out of treatment and have been sober before and I always end up back out on the street, right back to the bottle when I leave treatment.”



**“We have a dream that one day  
one of us will win the lottery and  
we’ll all live in one home.”**





"I had to escape my abusive husband. Back home I was living 20 years of hell."





“At tent city we live communally. We share with each other.”



“We need a witness on the street.”







**Theme 6: Debt/Arrears**

“The maintenance child support took all my money. I had two snow machines, they took that. Even my Residential School money went directly into my ex’s account. I don’t have anything. Even if I got a job I wouldn’t be able to afford to live anywhere because they will deduct my pay cheques.”

“I have debt so I can’t get a place. If I strike rich I’ll have a house.”

“I like not having a job because that means I have less worries. I am in arrears so I couldn’t live anywhere until I pay all that back, but I could never afford to. If I had an apartment I would be paying lots of money for it. I think that’s dumb. No money, no worries.”

“I have an outstanding debt with the government. But I can’t claim bankruptcy because it’s a government loan.”

**Theme 7: Need a place of their own/Independence**

“I need a place with a lock and key so I can store my stuff, and just avoid people when I want to be alone. And also a place to do my artwork. Right now I carry all my important things with me like my ID, and valuables in my backpack. If I lose my backpack, I lose everything. I’ve

lost my backpack several times.”

“A place would help me have a routine. Somewhere couples are allowed.”

“I would like a big house with enough rooms for my family.”

“If I was able to get my own room I could stay sober longer. Being around all those drunks just makes me depressed, and I just end up drinking myself.”

**Discussion of Findings**

It is important to note that it was explained to the participants that they were open to take pictures that represent their daily life in order to tell their story, and they were not restricted to taking pictures in the downtown core. The results were varied. The majority of the pictures that were taken were of places around downtown that were “meeting spots.” These pictures, which at first seemed to be repetitive or very similar to each other, are considered as an honest reflection of their daily experience. The majority of the participants were either friends or acquaintances and expressed that the areas near the alley ways, doorways (front or rear entrances to buildings in the downtown core) are significant because it is where they would connect in large groups, socialize, share their



“If I was able to get my own room I could stay sober longer. Being around all those drunks just makes me depressed, and I just end up drinking myself.”







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“We have a camaraderie.”



alcohol or discuss who could or would purchase alcohol. Other pictures near the downtown area were of places where smaller groups would connect, and others were personal areas where people liked to be alone, and to keep some of their belongings and keep their “stash” of alcohol during the day. There were also various pictures of stairwells, areas behind fences, and front porches where others would either drink or try to get some rest. From these observations and discussions, the majority of the participants had alcohol as a primary pre-occupation of their daily lives.

What these pictures and the discussion that took place revealed was a strong emotional connection to their peers, and that these relationships are an important source of belonging, which also provides safety and security for the group. It is important to note that if they don't have a positive support network in Yellowknife that individuals can rely on, such as with either family, friends, or counsellors/staff, individuals will try to fill that void. If it is to build strong and close ties with their homeless peers, whom may be suffering from substance abuse, despite it being unhealthy it might often be the only option for feeling a connection to community.

The participants who were open about struggling with alcohol, and who were frequently under the influence during contact throughout the research project, had taken pictures that were mostly of “drinking” places or friends that they often drank with, and that they considered positive associations. The two participants who did not identify as alcoholics, it was interesting to note, did not take pictures of any people. One individual, identified as a crack-cocaine user, had taken pictures of a variety of locations, and because he frequently used a bicycle and carried his belongings with him in his backpack, revealed those in most of his pictures. This participant emphasized that the lack of places to store items and lock and protect his bike and backpack, makes him vulnerable to both theft and loss of everything he owns – stating that he would ultimately have to “start over.”

The other individual who did not take pictures of people, who considered herself as sober had taken pictures of meals and different foods that she had to frequently eat, but considered “bad.” In contrast to the “bad” food, this individual took pictures of trees, gardens, and flowers and described that as “healthy things like country foods.” This participant was also the only person to take a picture of a house which she considered as her “dream to live in” - a home her own.

Having debt and arrears also proved to be a common theme, and revealed that it was a disincentive for some people to work because it would either go to paying for expensive housing or the government would make deductions from their income. There were also strong links between a breakdown in relationships, which manifests in different forms such as the breaking up or fighting with a significant other, fighting with family members, and feeling of discrimination/disrespect by the public or agency staff. There is also a related theme of loss or lack of personal autonomy and independence within the provision of transitional housing and emergency shelter. These perceptions, which may or may not be misconceptions resulting from miscommunication, could affect personal self-worth and contribute to depression on top of an already vulnerable situation. Some of the participants confirmed that lack of independence and autonomy can lead someone who has a history of substance abuse/addictions to revert to alcohol or drugs. Therefore the cycle of addictions and homelessness continues for people who are unable to live independently in stable permanent housing.

Some of the men indicated that the transitional housing complex was not an option for them because they had “burned bridges” with staff (which was cited by Christensen as a common theme)<sup>32</sup>, or rather than be subjected to strict authoritarian rules, living outside in tent city seemed like the better or only option. Others users of the shelter services have expressed the lack of dignity or self-respect as a result of feeling like they are on “the lowest rung on the ladder of life.” There are graduated levels of sleeping accommodation, from emergency shelter mats, to bunk beds, single beds, and private rooms. And based on conversation with two participants, there are varying levels of stress and achievement associated with each of the levels.

Some of the findings linked with the concept of urban to rural migration revealing that people who left their home community were intending to improve their situation and start somewhere new. Several people recounted that the domestic violence and breakdown of relationships due to alcohol have influenced their decision to leave home. Others were involved in the mining sector and explained that most of their money earned was spent to feed their addictions.

Most of the participants recognize that alcohol and drug use was an important factor in their move to Yellowknife (to either feed the addiction or recover from it). Sev-

32 See Christensen, J. 2011.

eral mentioned that incarceration or seeking addictions treatment was another reason for coming to Yellowknife, and that after jail or treatment, often they would end up relapsing and would have to start the process from square one. Therefore a cycle of addictions-homelessness-jail was a common occurrence. This issue points to a criticism of the discharge planning process of both the criminal justice system and rehabilitation/addiction treatment. There seems to be lack of follow-up and on-going healing and rehabilitation to prevent relapse. Part of the reason is that there is a lack of data about the migration patterns of Yellowknife's homeless, which may impact on the ability for individual agencies to provide services. Certainly a more integrated and coordinated approach, where agencies work together and provide ongoing support and continuum of care to individuals after they are discharged, could provide better continuity of services and case management and a buffer against relapse. There are significant challenges on gathering data and statistics on homelessness in Yellowknife in general due to the numerous agencies and inconsistent nature of accessing/attending various programs and services.<sup>33</sup> There are also privacy and confidentiality issues relating to sharing personal case file information between agencies.

## Conclusion

Some of the participants expressed that the photovoice process allowed them to be heard, and that it is what is often missing in their lives, which was for people to listen to their concerns as if it mattered. Several stated that people rarely do something so nice and fun with them, and really enjoyed the photography process. In the academic literature, it is suggested that those impacted by homelessness often have fewer opportunities than the general population to participate in policy processes, especially in relation to decisions that affect them. Therefore, it is important to recognize that social disadvantages such as homelessness prevent their voices from being heard among policy makers and therefore we need to understand how might these participatory practices be incorporated into ongoing processes and policy development.<sup>34</sup>

At the final policy workshop event, the dialogue that occurred revealed that participatory research with marginal and oppressed people in society can contribute to meaningful policy discussion on issues that directly affect them. Some of the invited public guests at the workshop expressed that it was an important example of how policy research can be conducted in a respectful and inclusionary way. Without the participation of the co-researchers, vital understanding of effective policy solutions will be missed.

<sup>33</sup> In addition, anecdotal information suggests that there is a significant amount of migration/moving to and from Yellowknife and the home community.

<sup>34</sup> Norman, T. and Pauly, B. 2013. Including people who experience homelessness: a scoping review of the literature. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* Vol. 33 No. 3/4, pp. 136-151: Pg. 143-144.

## Recommendations

### ***Recommendation 1: Provide greater independence and contribute to self-sufficiency and empowerment***

Programs and services that provide greater independence can foster a greater sense of responsibility and ownership over one's circumstances and future. It can empower those who have a history of dis-empowerment related to discrimination, historical trauma, addictions, dis-connection from community and dependence on social services. While this is not a specific policy (program) recommendation, this reflects some basic principles and desires of the Photovoice research participants.

### ***Recommendation 2: Increase the quantity and quality of addictions treatment programming across the Territory***

There is a lack of addictions treatment programs in the Northwest Territories. Without a long-term residential treatment facility and addictions services to serve people from across the Territory, there will remain a need for treatment support and options for chronic sufferers and individuals with severe cases of addictions. In order to overcome the identified lack of coordination between health/social, justice, and housing services, a more integrated approach to healing and wellness programming is required, that reflects the interrelated issues of trauma, addictions, and homelessness.

### ***Recommendation 3: Develop culturally-relevant programs and services***

Because of the high proportion of Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness in Yellowknife, front-line service providers in the homelessness sector in Yellowknife work almost exclusively with Aboriginal people. While there are diverse experiences and backgrounds, it is important to understand indigenous traditions and practices, not only to create awareness but also to develop programs that reflect indigenous philosophical approach to case management that includes traditional healing and wellness services. Linking these services with housing programming might contribute to better policy outcomes such as improved service uptake, housing retention, and community integration.

With the current policy discourse in Yellowknife focused on proposed implementation of Housing First projects in the city, it is important to frame the recommendations within this context. A fundamental question to ask

is: “How will the new Housing First projects respond to the specific needs of indigenous people? Is it possible to utilize a cultural framework in design and delivery within the Housing First model?”

Having said that, in order to know what specific culturally-relevant services should be implemented, it is imperative to first develop a participatory process of consultation and establish on-going dialogue with people experiencing homelessness as key stakeholders in the policy process.

#### ***Recommendation 4: Allow for flexible/unique housing options***

Within the context of a Housing First project, and related to culturally relevant programming, the Photovoice research revealed that the majority of the participants preferred the freedom of living by their own rules, on their own terms, and found the connection with their peers on the street to be really important. Therefore, it will be important to research innovative housing plans and designs that are conducive to a more open and welcoming environment for friends or family members visiting. It will be important for residents to not feel isolated and disconnected from their support network.

#### ***Recommendation 5: Create an inclusionary policy making process (consultation and participation)***

According to Labonte (2004) “Social inclusion and exclusion are two ‘sides of a coin.’ That is, to promote social inclusion we must address processes and policies that exclude to avoid reinforcing processes that work to keep circumstances as they currently are.”<sup>35</sup>

By providing opportunities for dialogue to better understand the experiences and needs of the homeless, policy success and outcomes can then be measured more accurately based on the needs of the intended target group. Meaningful inclusion will occur if there is intent to have participant input help shape policy development. Since the Yellowknife Homelessness Coalition and Community Advisory Board oversee the development of homelessness housing projects in Yellowknife, it is important that the organizations establish mechanisms for inclusion.

#### ***Recommendation 6: Establish a Homelessness Secretariat to reduce policy conflicts between GNWT Departments***

Several GNWT policies located in separate departments

deliver different programs that target low-income groups and people vulnerable to homelessness. In many cases, the various social envelope departments serve the same clientele. Greater integration between the different departments could provide greater efficiency, coherence and consistency in programming to produce better results. An agency/homelessness secretariat could provide greater oversight and co-ordination for policies that directly affect people experiencing or vulnerable to homelessness. The agency could pool resources and have the capacity to conduct research and gather statistics more accurately.

Having one agency responsible for tracking and receiving detailed information in a consistent and secure manner could provide better measures and evaluation of GNWT programs. Furthermore, the literature revealed the challenges on accurately tracking data and statistics on homelessness in Yellowknife due to the numerous agencies and inconsistent nature of accessing/attending various programs and services. In general, statistics on homelessness in Yellowknife do not give the complete picture of homelessness. Instead, some of the major sources of information regarding homeless demography and numbers has been obtained anecdotally.

#### ***Recommendation 7: Develop an Urban Aboriginal Policy for the City of Yellowknife***

Homelessness issues in Yellowknife reveal that the city lacks an overall homelessness policy strategy that relates specifically to an urban Aboriginal context. From a governance perspective, while Aboriginal relations typically come under Federal and/or Territorial responsibility (depending on the issue), the City of Yellowknife should take a leadership role to respond to the needs of its aboriginal residents, as it contains a large proportion of Dene, Metis, and Inuit (and Inuvialuit) groups.

Urban Aboriginal Policy, as a broad strategy, should not focus on one single issue such as homelessness; and there is no suggestion that there is a direct correlation between municipal policies and politics and aboriginal homelessness. The recommendation offered here is that the City of Yellowknife has an important role to recognize the unique context applicable to the urban Aboriginal population and understand how municipal programs and services can better serve these groups (along the lines of culturally relevant programming). By recognizing this, the City will be in a better position to support urban Aboriginal specific (and measurable) outcomes.

35 LaBonte, R. (2004), “Social inclusion/exclusion: dancing the dialectic”, Health Promotion International, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 115-121., cited in Norman, T. and Pauly, B. 2013. “Including people who experience homelessness: a scoping review of the literature.” International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy Vol. 33 No. 3/4, Pg. 136-151: Pg. 143







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