



FACTSHEET

Four Promising Practices to Support Indigenous Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Developed from Supporting Indigenous Youth Experiencing Homelessness (2018) by Suzanne Stewart, in S. Kidd, N. Slesnick, T. Frederick, J. Karabanow, & S. Gaetz (Eds.), *Mental Health and Addiction Interventions for Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Practical Strategies for Front-Line Providers* (89-100). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

For many Indigenous youth, homelessness not only describes the lack of a physical home. It may also describe feeling that they are missing a cultural or spiritual identity.

Addressing the physical issue alone may not be sufficient, and youth will likely benefit from services that support them to (re)develop these identities. It's important for youth workers to approach the issue of Indigenous youth homelessness from an understanding of its root causes: colonialism, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and ongoing racism and discrimination.

01. Develop culturally-based interventions.

Developing a cultural connection supports Indigenous people's healing. Indigenous approaches to health and wellbeing will differ from mainstream approaches; culturally-based interventions need to look for overlaps between the two and find ways to adapt or design services. The basic principle is that space must be created to deliver services that respect Indigenous worldviews and are reflective of Indigenous approaches to healing.



02. Use a holistic framework.

Using a hybrid approach, service providers can integrate the best of both Indigenous and mainstream paradigms and practices to best serve the needs of the client. This goes beyond simply showing 'cultural sensitivity;' rather, the practitioner needs to be able to see things from both mainstream and Indigenous perspectives. In practice, this means ensuring that various ways of knowing and healing are seen as equally valid.

03. Focus on relationships.

Building strong, genuine relationships cannot be overlooked as part of culturally-based interventions. Appropriate humour, self-disclosure (within reasonable limits and guided by professional ethics), and showing empathy can help to strengthen therapeutic rapport.

Indigenous Youth Homelessness

Over 40% of Indigenous people in Canada are under the age of 24, and 28% are under the age of 14 (Statistics Canada, 2013).

Indigenous people are overrepresented in Canada's homeless population, making up 5-60%, depending on the area. As a result of colonialism, Indigenous people face many barriers to finding and maintaining safe, affordable, and secure housing. These barriers include poverty, discrimination, mental health challenges, substance use, intergenerational trauma, and a lack of access to culturally-appropriate social services and housing.

The cultural genocide of Indigenous people through residential schools and child welfare interventions has left lasting mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual impacts, which can be seen as social determinants of homelessness.

04. Acknowledge cultural context in mental health assessments.

When using mainstream assessment tools, youth workers should take into account how colonialism has personally impacted individual youth, as well as consider the broader context of colonialism.

Youth workers are cautioned against making clinical judgments solely from a Western lens, and are encouraged to consider how symptoms and behaviours are part of a bigger picture – one that should consider the role of values, community, family, and the ongoing impacts of colonialism. When possible, youth workers may consider consulting with Indigenous Elders and healers during the assessment process.