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No Place to Be: Confronting Inadequate Housing and Health Disparity for Indigenous Canadians

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Introduction:

On November 21, 2017, Canada's Justice Minister, Jody Wilson-Raybould, announced that the federal government will support Bill C-262 which calls for an alignment of Canada's laws and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) including the recommendation for an action plan to implement UNDRIP across Canada (Tasker, 2017). This long-awaited announcement highlights a major social challenge facing Canada in the next decade: how to address the many areas of inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

Of the 94 recommendations made in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a number specifically address the issue of health disparities for Indigenous peoples, though none speak directly to the issue of housing. Recommendation 18 is particularly significant as it calls upon the government to "acknowledge that the current state of Aboriginal health in Canada is a direct result of previous Canadian government policies, including residential schools" (TRC 2015, 2). Policy makers must now acknowledge that there are significant, complex health disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. As Allan and Smylie note, "social determinants of health approaches seek to understand not only the causes of health inequities, but the causes of the causes, such as access to income security, employment, education, food and shelter" (2015, 6). In discussing health and Indigenous peoples, it is important to understand that colonization, racism, and social exclusion are often considered "distal" determinants of health whereas intermediate and "proximal" determinants of health include "physical environments (including housing and infrastructure), health behaviours, education, employment, income and food security" (Allan and Smylie 2015, 7).

While housing may be a proximal rather than distal determinant of health, the particular importance of housing to Indigenous peoples and its relationship to health cannot be overemphasized. Colonialism has affected many determinants of health for Indigenous peoples, "ranging from proximal determinates like housing and poverty, to the distal determinants of cultural continuity, self-

determination, and an Indigenous sense of home” (Christensen 2016, 84). This paper argues that the strong connection between Indigenous concepts of health and home makes the need for improved housing conditions for Indigenous peoples even more urgent and is one of the most important social challenges facing our nation today. One under-explored solution may be found in co-operative housing principles and values, which have potential to align with Indigenous world-views and meanings of ‘home.’

Background:

The relationship between health and housing is widely accepted: “within public policy discourse in Canada, stable, adequate housing has been identified as a social determinant of health” (Shier et al. 2015, 67). Without stable and adequate housing, individuals are at increased risk for mental and physical illness. These are particularly important considerations when it comes to Indigenous Canadians, who have higher rates of homelessness than non-Indigenous Canadians, with estimates of between 25 to 80 per cent, depending on the city or community (Shier et al, 67-8). Moreover, it is reported that Indigenous households have higher shelter-cost-to-income-ratios as compared to non-Indigenous Canadians (Statistics Canada 2008b, 24) and are almost four times likelier to live in overcrowded dwellings and three times likelier to live in homes needing major repairs (Statistics Canada 2008a, 16). In considering how to address these health and housing disparities, it is necessary to recognize Indigenous conceptualizations of ‘home.’ For Indigenous Canadians ‘home’ includes physical structures, but is also much more than that, encompassing “families as well as communities, the land, culture, and self-determination, all of which are also social determinants of Indigenous health” (Christensen 2016, 88). For this reason, housing disparity should be given more consideration and attention as a determinant of health for Indigenous peoples.

It should be acknowledged that addressing inadequate housing for Indigenous peoples is the responsibility of the federal government. As Peter Menzies argues, federal government policy such as the Indian Act of 1876 combined with the residential school system and more recent child welfare policies have impacted multiple generations of Indigenous peoples with the effect being “the severing of family and community ties – that is, creation of a homeless state ” (2006, 4). For Indigenous peoples, the residential school legacy has impacted the very meaning of ‘home’ even affecting “the experience of ‘home’ at the individual, familial, community, and nation level” (Menzies 2008, 46).

Given the relationship between inadequate housing and poor health outcomes and the severe damage that has been done to ‘home’ for Indigenous peoples as a result of colonization, “greater effort needs to be made at a public policy and programmatic level that aims to address this situation of Indigenous people being over-represented within Canada’s precariously-housed population” (Shier et al. 2015, 69). However, there is agreement that this policy needs to take into account Indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination and should utilize collaborative processes for addressing health and housing needs. Indeed, as the federal government now outlines in its Principles Respecting the Government of Canada’s relationship with Indigenous peoples, the right to self-determination is of primary importance (Department of Justice 2017).

Policy addressing health and housing for Indigenous peoples needs to consider Indigenous meanings of home before solutions can be identified. An effective housing policy for Indigenous peoples requires “a holistic approach that reconstructs the links between the individual, family, community, and Aboriginal nation” (Menzies 2006, 20). Homelessness and inadequate housing for Indigenous peoples is “a collective experience of ‘disbelonging’ as a result of the settler colonial project, and a very individual, intimate and embodied experience of literally being without secure shelter, and without a place to be” (Christensen 2016, 84-5). It should be noted that there are diverse Indigenous

concepts of the relationship between health and home, and any housing policy for Indigenous peoples should promote “Indigenous homemaking practices and thereby recognize the deep cultural links between health and home” (Christensen 2016, 84).

Strategy:

In approaching housing solutions for Indigenous peoples, the right to self-determination must be upheld. As the UNDRIP states, “In particular, indigenous peoples have the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions” (United Nations 2008, 9). For this reason, housing co-operatives and co-operative principles (see Appendix A) are an area of opportunity in addressing the current Indigenous housing crisis.

Housing co-operatives are currently under-utilized in Canada. In their 2014 report, Craig and Hamilton explain that only five housing co-operatives in Canada have been developed by and specifically for Indigenous people (2014, 3). This is unfortunate given the many ways that co-operative principles and housing co-operatives can be compatible with Indigenous world views. Indeed, the concept of co-operatives is not new to Indigenous peoples: “while the modern form of the housing co-operative has existed for over three hundred years, Aboriginal people have long had housing that was communal in nature” (Craig and Hamilton 2014, 9). Craig and Hamilton explain that longhouse homes and kinship groups are examples of Indigenous practices that share some principles with co-operatives (2014, 9). Ideally, housing co-operatives can offer members active participation and inclusion in the operation of their co-operative, control over management, and affordable high-quality housing (Craig and Hamilton 2014, 9). Importantly, there are also opportunities for housing co-operatives to incorporate cultural values into daily operations. For example, Craig and Hamilton cite mutual respect and reciprocity, honouring the traditional roles of women, and the Seven Grandfather teachings of the Anishnabe

people as Indigenous values that became central to the housing co-operatives studied (2014, 17). In addition, housing co-operatives may be designed to more easily accommodate and honour the extended kinship ties common in Indigenous families, as opposed to the Western nuclear family and household (Craig and Hamilton 2014, 19). Most importantly, the co-operative principles of democracy, autonomy and concern for community are highly compatible with Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, making co-operatives a strategy that government should encourage (Craig and Hamilton 2014, 3).

Conclusion:

Until the mid-1980s, Canadian housing policy was based on adequate and affordable housing for all citizens (Walker 2005, 2349). Since then, federal support for affordable housing and co-operative housing has diminished. At a time when lack of affordable housing has become urgent for many Canadians, the federal government has announced its intention to once more prioritize affordable housing, though without yet speaking to the specific needs of Indigenous peoples (Mathieu 2017). There is an opportunity at hand for the federal government to accept its "responsibility for leadership in urban Aboriginal policy and programming (and housing in particular) by virtue of its historic relationship with Aboriginal peoples" (Walker 2005, 2360) and to work collaboratively with Indigenous people to meet housing and health needs. Any new housing strategy targeting Indigenous peoples ought to acknowledge the lasting and continuing effects of colonization on Indigenous peoples and the unique relationship that exists for them between health and home. Most importantly, any new housing strategy for Indigenous peoples must protect their right to self-determination in addressing health and housing inequities. Keeping self-determination paramount, housing co-operatives deserve more exploration for their potential to meet the needs of Indigenous Canadians.

Appendix A

Co-operative Principles

1. Voluntary and Open Membership
2. Democratic Member Control
3. Member Economic Participation
4. Autonomy and Independence
5. Education, Training and Information
6. Co-operation among Co-operatives
7. Concern for Community

(International Co-operative Alliance 2005)

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