NEW BRUNSWICK ABORIGINAL PEOPLES COUNCIL

Nidap Wiquag: Engaging Aboriginal Youth in Addressing Homelessness

April 2016

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Executive Summary

This report set out to identify the supports, challenges, and barriers Aboriginal youth experience within situations of homelessness in urban New Brunswick. Its purpose was to develop a number of recommendations for various agencies to consider moving forward, in hopes of aiding homeless Aboriginal youth.

A total of 43 Aboriginal youth participated in the project across three urban centres; Fredericton, Saint John, and Moncton. Each youth had the option of participating in a one-on-one interview or in a "research circle". Given that a number of the concepts involved in the project are contested, these terms were defined for methodological purposes. "Youth" was defined as between the ages of 12-30, as this age range was not only reflected in the literature, but also increased participation and allowed us to capture a more diverse set of experiences. For the term "homeless" we used the Canadian Homelessness Research Network definition that includes four distinct categories: 1) Unsheltered, 2) Emergency Sheltered, 3) Provisionally Accommodated, and 4) At Risk of Homelessness. For the purposes of this study we used the CHRN's categories of homelessness. "Urban" mirrored the Statistics Canada definition of "population center" which is defined as any area with a population of at least 1000 and a density of at least 400 persons per square kilometre. And finally "Aboriginal", perhaps the most contested term was left as broad as possible including not only status and non-status, but also those who identify with their Aboriginal ancestry or way of life.

The research circles, interviews, and this report were structured around four themes. The first theme was "looking back". Here we were attempting to capture the factors that lead to homelessness. All of the participants experienced poverty from an early age and drug and alcohol abuse were present in the majority of the participants homes. 41 of the 43 participants began their lives living on a reserve, and the lack of/inadequacy of on-reserve housing was a major determinant for urban Aboriginal youth homelessness. **The report recommends that steps be taken to address family on-reserve housing or the housing needs of Aboriginal people off-reserve. It also recommends that there be earlier intervention for drug and alcohol abuse.** Positive social relationships were also lacking in many of the youths early lives. **The report recommends that steps be taken to foster and build positive social relationships, either through the construction of youth outreach centres/teen resource on and off reserve or through youth athletics/extra-curricula's on and off reserve.**

The second theme was "between then and now" and it explored how the transition to homelessness affected the participants. The youth expressed a number of survival/coping mechanisms that are inhibiting the transition out of homelessness. **This report recommends that service providers adapt to and address these survival/coping mechanisms as a way to better serve homeless urban Aboriginal youth.**

The third theme was "Assistance", and in this theme the services and agencies used by the homeless urban Aboriginal youth were explored in greater detail. The general consensus from the youth was that there was a lack of, or no services available to address the problem of Aboriginal youth homeless or peripheral issues. **The report recommends that new strategies be developed by service providers and agencies to reach homeless urban Aboriginal youth. Furthermore a new ethics must be developed to deal with the specific context of homeless Aboriginal youth. This report recommends that individuals within service organizations participate in cultural sensitivity training.**

The final theme was "what could be done better". Here the youth told us what could be done better by service providers to better meet their needs. The responses varied, some youth wanted cultural or traditional practices incorporated into the services the might receive, while other youth re-stressed the importance of employment training and adequate housing on and off reserve. **The report recommends that the voices of these youth be heard and action be taken to integrate their voices into the development of services off reserve.**

INTRODUCTION

> "To Whom It May Concern; I am writing you this letter to tell you about my experience with homelessness. First of all, I would like to say that my life is beautiful."

This quote, written by a participant who had heard of the project, captures the spirit of every participant we had the pleasure of hearing from over the course of this project. These are not a group of people who are "defeated", "hopeless", "unambitious", or "pessimistic", as they are too often framed. As researchers we were struck with intense feelings of hope and optimism due to how full of hope, pride, ambition, and optimism the participants of the project were in the face of such adversity.

Despite the general feeling of hope and optimism, the needs are great for the Aboriginal youth we interviewed. Not only have Aboriginal peoples been subject to historical dispossession of Aboriginal lands, they are the most materially, socially and spatially deprived ethno-cultural group in Canada today and are subject to an Aboriginal-specific homeless and housing crisis[1]. This is not a simple problem with a singular solution. Homelessness for Aboriginal youth is the product of a complex interaction of factors, and this is a theme we will see throughout this report.

It is our goal with this report to not only highlight the systemic deficits that Aboriginal youth face in their experiences of homelessness, but to give you, the reader, a glimpse into the lives, thoughts and feelings of these incredible youth, to share with you their strengths, so that we can all better understand what it is they need. As Walker and Barcham stated, "Aboriginal quality of life can be improved only on Aboriginal peoples' own terms and not prepackaged Eurocentric terms."[2] The first step in accomplishing this is to hear the voices of Aboriginal youth who have experienced, or are experiencing homelessness. At its core, that is what this project is primarily concerned with, and the structure of the interviews/research circles (and this report) reflect that.

This report begins with a methodology section, outlining some of the conceptual definitions used and an overview of the methodologies chosen for the project. Following the methodology section is the projects findings; the stories of the homeless Aboriginal Youth who participated in the project. The report concludes by summing up the findings and exploring the suggestions for policy makers that arose through the course of the interviews/research circles.

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[1] Patrick, Caryl. (2014). Aboriginal Homelessness in Canada: A Literature Review. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.

[2] Walker, R. C., & Barcham, M. (2010). Indigenous-inclusive Citizenship: The City and Social Housing in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. *Environment and Planning A,* 42(2), 314-331.

METHODOLOGY

Prior to outlining conceptual definitions and exploring the methods used, it is important to take a moment to tell the reader who we are as researchers. Colin Hitchcock was born in Fredericton, New Brunswick. He has a Bachelor of Arts with honours in Anthropology from St. Thomas University and is currently a law student at UNB in Fredericton. His wife is Wolastoqiyik from St. Mary's reserve and they have two children together. Colin and his wife have lived in St. Mary's reserve for over eleven years. Roy Stewart was born in Fredericton, New Brunswick. His father was Wolastoqiyik. Roy has a Bachelor of Arts with honours in Sociology from St. Thomas University and is currently a law student at UNB in Fredericton. Roy will be articling at Burchells LLP in Halifax in the summer of 2016.

As stated above, the goal of this research project was to: 1) determine the supports currently in place for homeless Aboriginal youth; 2) identify the challenges these youth face in their situation of homelessness, and; 3) outline the barriers that Aboriginal youth face in their attempts to avoid or escape homelessness. To do this we explored the lived experiences of homeless Aboriginal youth in three New Brunswick cities; Fredericton, Saint John, and Moncton. Qualitative data was gathered through the use of culturally sensitive research circles, as well as through one-on-one interviews, depending on the preference of the participants. At each interview/research circle, anonymous standard information forms [3] were also completed by each participant consisting of questions such as, age, sex, income, etc.

In order to gain access to participants, who are highly mobile and without regular access to various social media and/or other forms of communication, we had to first establish connections with service providers who would connect us with possible participants. Due to the nature of the project and our desire for experiential data, the lived experiences of homeless Aboriginal youth, we did not limit the field of participants to those who are currently homeless, but included youth that have been through homelessness in the past and survived to tell their stories to us.

When the time came to actually engage with and interview the participants, we used two primary methods, the research circle and the one-on-one interview. The research circle was chosen because it is a cultural tool widely known amongst many Aboriginal peoples [4]. Cyndy Baskin in her similar research in the Toronto area [5] used research circles with great success. She found the research circle to be a "legitimate way of conducting research with [Aboriginal] youth". Baskin identified the need for further research in this area to be carried out, and stated "these templates can be incorporated into future projects involving more youth in Toronto, other cities in Ontario and urban centres across Canada." Similar to Baskin's research circles, participants in this

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[3] See Appendix A

[4] Research circles can be thought of as akin to talking circles, but without the formality of a talking stick / feather. It was the formation of the circle itself used as a means of creating a supportive environment in which the youth felt comfortable sharing stories.

[5] Cyndy Baskin (2007). Aboriginal Youth Talk about Structural Determinants as the Causes of their Homelessness. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, Vol 3, No 3.

project were free to decide for themselves what areas they wanted to contribute to throughout the course of the research circle.

The alternative method to the research circle was a one-on-one interview. It was recognized that given the broad range of backgrounds the participants had, some participants might not be comfortable with participating in a research circle. As an alternative, the semi-structured interview is an excellent tool for situations where you would be getting only one chance to interview someone[6] and by utilizing an interview guide [7], the interviewer still maintains a degree of flexibility, as the interview guide acts more as a general script and/or a list of topics to cover.

Defining key concepts played an important role in the development and implementation of our methodology. There are a number of central concepts relating to the project that are either contested and/or fluid and due to their centrality they had to be explored in order to fully grasp the larger methodological choices being made. The four most important of these concepts were; "youth", "homeless/home", "Aboriginal", and "urban". What follows is a brief survey of the literature and subsequent explanations and justifications for the methodological choices we made as a result.

Youth

The first concept is "youth". Youth is a highly contextual term, its meaning can change given the purpose of a study or the agency, service, program, or institution one is dealing with. Given the goal of this study, which was to determine the supports, challenges, and barriers Aboriginal youth face in their experiences of homelessness, we decided not to limit the definition of youth. For example, if the purpose of the study was to evaluate the supports, challenges, and barriers to youth who are involved with Child Protection Services in some capacity, the obvious election would be to limit the definition to the parameters of youth under the *Family Services Act*[8]. In broadening the definition, we have used a minimum-maximum approach, taking the minimum age associated with youth in the literature, and paired it with the maximum age associated with youth from the literature. What this left us with was an age range of 12 years of age to 30 years of age.

The arguments for including persons up to 30 years of age within the definition of youth arose out of the fact that some youth programs in Canada are designed for, and accommodate people up to 30 years of age[9]. The lower end of the spectrum has its origin in the current legal regime in

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[6] Bernard, Russell H., 2011. *Research Methods in Anthropology; Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Fifth Edition (AltaMira Press), note 13 at 157.

[7] See Appendix C

[8] *Family Services Act,* SNB 1980, c F-2.2

[9] Kelly, K., & Caputo, T. (2007). Health and Street/Homeless Youth. *Journal of Health Psychology,* 12(5), 726-736.

Canada. The *Criminal Code of Canada*[10] marks the distinction between childhood/preadolescence and youth by excluding from criminal liability those under 12, while conversely, the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* deems youths over 12 years of age as liable for their actions. Furthermore, many "youth" services and programs are made available to youth for the first time at age 12. Another theoretical approach to the issue of defining "youth" has been looking at how life stages are as much about psychological processes as they are biological, and are intrinsically linked to symbolic social acts as well[11]. Cote[12], in describing what he refers to as "youthhood", or the second half of the twenties, explains how the quest for identity and the lifestyle of young people represent a "cultural lifestyle" which can be applied to age groups other than the 17-25-year-old age group, in his opinion the age group of 25-30.

The main benefit to using this expanded range was that it had the potential to increase participation and thus by extension provide access to a greater number of experiences. The core of this project is experiential and thus the greater number of narratives the better for research purposes. This project is not statistics based and thus we had greater freedom in this area. Furthermore, using the expanded age range also ensured that there would be no gaps in the research, especially given the broad range of services and programs individuals who are homeless may encounter between the ages of 12-30.

Homeless

The first thing that comes to mind for many when confronted with the term "homeless" is the image of a person living on the street without shelter, but "homeless" is a far more complex and broadly-encompassing term. In recent years the definition of "homeless" has been expanded by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) to include four distinct categories: 1) Unsheltered, 2) Emergency Sheltered, 3) Provisionally Accommodated, and 4) At Risk of Homelessness. For the purposes of this study we used the CHRN's categories of homelessness[13].

This definition of "homelessness" takes into account the fluidity of the experience for many individuals. Homelessness is not a static state but a fluctuating experience, where one's shelter

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[10] *Criminal Code,* RSC 1985, c C-46.

[11] Elder, Glen H., Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson and Robert Crosnoe. 2005. "The Emergence and Development of Life Course Theory." p. 3-19 in *Handbook of the Life Course*, edited by Jeylan Mortimer and Michael J. Shanahan: Springer.

[12] Coté, J. 2006. "Emerging Adulthood as an Institutionalized Moratorium: Risks and Benefits to Identify Formation." in *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century.* J. Arnett and J. Tanner, American Psychological Association.

[13] Canadian Homelessness Research Network. (2012). Canadian Definition of Homelessness. Toronto: Homeless Hub. Retrieved online January 05, 2016, at: http://www.homelesshub.ca/CHRNhomelessdefinition/

circumstances and options may shift and change quite dramatically, and with frequency[14]. Being primarily concerned from a research perspective with the experiential data, it was important for the purposes of this study to have the broadest definition of homelessness possible in order to not exclude any possible subjects as they traverse the homeless landscape.

Aboriginal

The term Aboriginal is a blanket term most commonly used in reference to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada. The term "First Nations" is often considered the most ambiguous of the three given that it refers to persons who identify as such but who also may or may not be registered as status-Indians under the *Indian Act*[15]. This complicated situation has been created by a number of policies throughout the years which forcibly removed status from individuals; an example being the loss of status for First Nations women who married non-First Nations men prior to 1985, or forcible alienation of people from their communities through forced adoption. The spectrum of First Nation identity is wide and complex, and affected by many determinants, yet in some cases it can be very narrow, referring only to status-Indians. For the purposes of this project we chose to use the term "Aboriginal Peoples", and will not be limited to contentious terms such as "First Nations". Aboriginal is the most inclusive general term in the Canadian context, and as such will include status and non-status, reserve and off-reserve, as well as those who identify with their Aboriginal ancestry or way of life. One goal of the analysis was to have strong comparative data, and thus gathering a broader set of Aboriginal backgrounds was conducive to this goal.

Urban

This project calls for the gathering of homeless Aboriginal youth experiences from three urban centres in New Brunswick. According to statistics Canada who use the term "population centre", urban is defined as an area with a population of at least 1,000 and a density of 400 or more people per square kilometer.[16] While many Aboriginal people transition between the rural and urban, for the purposes of this project we are qualifying an Aboriginal youth as "urban" if they make regular use of the urban landscape. This may include accessing services or programs, or regular occupation, etc. The urban centres we chose to conduct the research out of were Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John. According to the National Household Survey[17], Fredericton has a total population of 93,080, and a Aboriginal population of 3,455. Moncton, the largest city of the three, has a total population of 135,520, and a Aboriginal population of 2,435. Saint John has a total population of 125,005, and an Aboriginal population of 2,545.

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[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Indian Act,* RSC 1985, c·I-5, s 10.

[16] Statistics Canada, "From Urban Areas to Population Centres":
http://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/subjects/standard/sgc/notice/sgc-06

[17] National Household Survey: http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/fogs-spg/Pages/CMACASelector.cfm?lang=E&level=3#PR13

Research Circles and One-on-One Interviews

> "I've read this somewhere; Urbanized First Nations people are 8 times more susceptible to experiencing homelessness. Statistically, Indians aren't supposed to live that long when they are urbanized."[18]

In this research project with Aboriginal youth we conducted three research circles[19] and eleven one-on-one interviews with youth who are homeless, have experienced homelessness, or are at the risk of becoming homeless. A total of 43 youth participated. Within the research circles and interviews, youth were invited to discuss specific areas about their past and current situations. The youth were free to choose which areas of discussion they wanted to contribute to. The following basic information was obtained from the youth through a standard information form that all of the youth filled out.

The major trend in the place of origin was that ninety-five percent of the youth were originally from reserve communities; 41 of the 43 youth participants were from a reserve[20], with the other two youth being born into an off-reserve home. The youth from on-reserve were from various reserves in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, with all of the youth currently living in Fredericton, Moncton, or Saint John.

Where the youth are from

- 5% — On-reserve
- 95% — Off-reserve
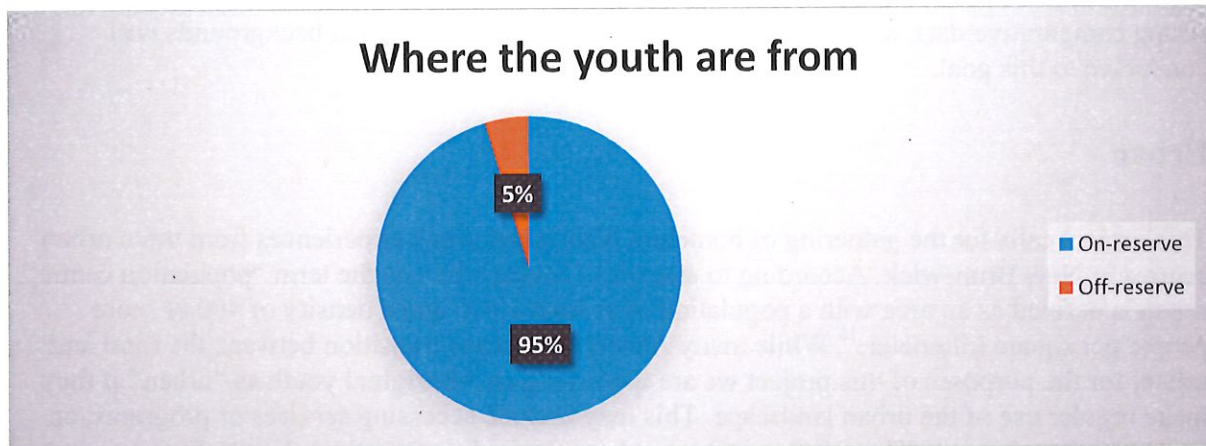
Sixty-five percent of the participants were male.[21] The age range of the youth participants spanned 16-30, with the average age being 24. None of the participants identified as

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[18] This quote was made by an 18-year-old male youth, who along with many other youth participants, was aware of the statistics facing Aboriginal peoples when they move away from their reserve communities.

[19] One research circle in each city: Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John. Facilitated with the assistance of an Elder in two of the research circles.

[20] All youth participants are from New Brunswick or Nova Scotia.

[21] 15 of the youth were female and 28 were male.

transgendered or transsexual. One female participant identified as bisexual, with the rest of the youth identifying as heterosexual.

The educational attainment varied greatly amongst the youth: two had a grade 6 education; two had a grade 9 education; seven had a grade 10 education; six had a grade 11 education; fourteen completed high school; four had some level of college, and; four of the youth have completed university. This broad range of educational attainment demonstrates that the stereotype of a homeless person being uneducated is simply not true, at least for the youth participants in this project. In contrast, these numbers are illustrative of the youth having a high completion rate for their academic studies. It is important to note that four of the youth are still attending high school, which means that the numbers provided here may not truly be reflective of the ultimate educational success of all the youth.[22]
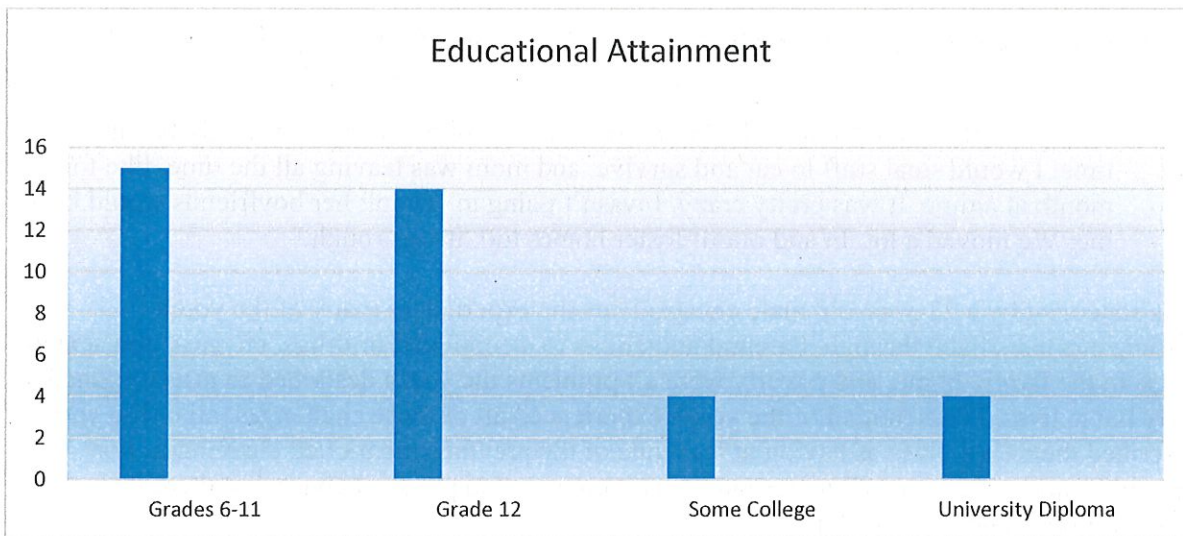
The four youth that have completed university degrees cited systemic issues in their communities, and barriers they face as Aboriginal persons, as contributing factors to their experiencing a sense of homelessness. These issues will be explored in detail below.

The main theme that emerged from our research was that living homelessness is a process. Homelessness for these Aboriginal youth does not have a succinct beginning or end, but is rather something that grows and gains momentum over long periods of time. There is an "ebb and flow" to their experiences, where their lives if viewed with a focused lens may appear to be alright in any particular moment. Aboriginal youth homelessness is systemic, but it is also historical. Every one of the interviews/research circles created the feeling of "I know where this

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[22] These high numbers of educational success are in contrast to a similar study carried out by Cindy Baskin in Toronto, nearly a decade ago, where the majority of her youth participants did not graduate high school: Cyndy Baskin (2007). Aboriginal Youth Talk about Structural Determinants as the Causes of their Homelessness. First Peoples Child & Family Review, Vol 3, No 3 at page 35.

story is going". For these youth the beginnings of homelessness first appear in childhood, and are the product of intergenerational trauma with their parents, grandparents, and other family/community relations, as well as other aspects of colonization, such as poverty and separation from the "mainstream" society.

This reality of the lived experiences of the Aboriginal youth in this project informed our decision to structure not only the interviews, but also this report around four themes. The themes found below cover the entire span of the youths lives. The themes are: (1) Looking back at how the youth grew in their early home lives; (2) Between then and now - How the transition to homelessness affected them and how they lived after, (3) What assistance the youth received or did not receive, and; (4) What could be done better? Youth suggestions for Government and policy makers. What follows is a more in-depth view of the four themes and some of the issues that arose from our interviews.

Looking back at how youth grew in their early home life

> "It was pretty rough for us kids. My mom, her addiction to drugs was really bad at that time. I would steal stuff to eat and survive, and mom was leaving all the time, like for a month at a time. It was pretty crazy. I wasn't going to school; her boyfriends would beat me. We moved a lot. In and out of foster homes too. It was rough."

This statement by a 22-year-old male encapsulates the experiences many of the youth participants have lived through. Parental addictions to alcohol and/or drugs, physical and sexual abuse in the family home, and poverty were all problems the youth described as affecting their early home lives. While not all of the youth experienced all of these challenges, all of the youth described their early lives as having at least one of the previous mentioned challenges. For example, another 22-year-old male stated that there was "no physical abuse, but there was poverty, drugs, and alcohol abuse."

I.   Back and Forth; From the Reserve to Urban and back Again

This information was provided by the youth because the first area of discussion we raised with the youth was to have them reflect back on their early home lives. We encouraged them to talk about what their home environment was like, who they lived with, and what their living situation was like before experiencing homelessness. However, some of the youth explained that they recall experiencing a sense of homelessness for as long as they could remember. Two of the youth's statements, which echo many of the other youth's experiences, describe the transition from living space to living space:

> "well, I lived with my mother for most of my life on-reserve, and besides that I've been living with other people on-reserve too. So like, we were living with my uncle [on-reserve] for the first little while when I was first born, and then we moved into an apartment out some ways [off-reserve] and then we moved to the trailer park [off-

reserve] and lived there for a while. Before that we lived with another uncle [on-reserve] too."

Another youth explained her early-life living situation:

> "I lived with a lot of people. I started off living with my mother and she had a boyfriend that she was with for quite a while. She ended up leaving when I was like twelve and she left me with that boyfriend because she couldn't afford to take care of me. Then I left when I was thirteen to go live with her. She lived on the reserve at that point, St. Mary's. That didn't really last too long, we lived in a lot of different places, on and off the rez [reserve] always getting evicted and stuff like that. Then I got taken away from her and put into a group home. I was in there for five years."

These statements are reflective of many of the youth's experiences. The majority of the youth mentioned that their families relocated more than once during their childhood, not by choice, resulting in feeling a sense of homelessness for as long as they could remember. Many of the youth stated that they lived with extended families, causing them to experience overcrowded living situations. There were multiple stories shared with us that describe the youth and their families moving multiple times at an early age, due to a lack of financial resources, no jobs available within their reserve communities, or due to a lack of housing on-reserve. One male described how the financial assistance received from the band office in his community is not enough to survive off-reserve:

> "Trying to get your own place, like the band will give you the first and end of month's rent, but like if you don't live on-reserve the band don't help you at all. There's no place you can live on the reserve because there isn't enough space. So basically you got a place off reserve for like two months, because there's no way to make rent and power."

II. Band Office Favoritism; The Effects on Obtaining Housing

The previous statement was made during a research circle, following which many other youths in the circle agreed with. As researchers we were made aware that the youth and their families were placed in a dilemma; either stay on the reserve and live in over-crowded accommodations, where the prospects for employment are minimal, or move off-reserve and receive less assistance from their band and feel a sense of isolation. In addition to these issues, the youth explained how favoritism within band politics played a role in the early lives:

> "Unless you know someone or have family in the band office you aren't gonna get the same help as those other guys who do. It sucks for people like me who don't. You see other people getting cheques and housing and leave us out in the cold. They don't care if we gotta move off-reserve. Its more money for them."

This was elaborated upon by another youth:

"A lot of the reserve though, like if you have family that works there then they help their family. If you're not family, they are not going to give them any help. There are people at St. Mary's who like get their houses built, and all their kids are getting their houses built but it seems like all those people who don't have family working for reserve aren't getting a home built. As for help, there is no help unless you have the same last name."

This favoritism, along with the other barriers cited by the youth, are factors that all form together in affecting the lived experiences of the youth. The movement from on-reserve to off-reserve, and repeating this many times, had the effect of causing a sense of disconnectedness for the youth. When we asked the youth to explain what they meant by this sense of disconnectedness, one youth stated "honestly, its friends or no friends. Living on-reserve means friends. Living off-reserve means complete isolation." Further, it is important to keep in mind that 41 of the 43 youth interviewed are from on-reserve. This is important because the majority of those 41 youth explained situations where they would transition from on-reserve to off-reserve, sometimes on multiple occasions. The result of these numbers is that the majority of the youth experienced some form of disconnectedness from their communities, families, and friends as a result of having to move off-reserve.

When discussing their mobility between on and off-reserve, the dominant theme that flowed from the conversation with the youth was that there is not near enough housing on-reserves to accommodate the growing number of community members. Additionally, when moving off-reserve the youth and their families were entering into a situation where they did not have the family support systems, nor the support from their band, as they did when residing on-reserve. Many of the youth recall the transition into an off-reserve setting as causing them to feel very isolated and alone, even though they were living with their immediate family members.

When we say the youth often moved from on-reserves to off-reserve, often repeating this cycle, the geographical area covered by the youth and their mobile families was actually quite broad. A handful of youth described their frequent mobility between communities in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, while another youth stated:

> "There's no housing [on-reserve] so there was always a bunch of families living together. So we moved to Maine, then we moved to New Hampshire, but we had a family breakdown. So we went back to the reserve with my mom, and back to my grandmother's house, then we went to another reserve and stayed with family. Then moved to Elsipogtog and stayed with my mother's father. There were three families in there with my grandparents. So my whole life until I was 18 we were always living with other people."

Quotes such as this were frequent throughout the research circles and one-on-one interviews. The youth explained how their families transition on and off-reserve was not limited to the nearest city or community. Rather, this statement, along with many others provided, describe how the youth and their families relied on friends and families for accommodations, even if that meant moving hundreds of miles away from their home community. However, the support received by

youth and their families that moved between provinces was less than that received by youth who moved off-reserve within their own province:

> "There weren't any support systems for us when we moved from Nova Scotia [on-reserve] to New Brunswick [off-reserve], not that I know of. We were in native housing, off-reserve. But that's it, that's all we got from anyone. And we weren't in province from where we were from, so they [band office] seem to cut you off."

III.   Overcrowding Living Situations and the Abuse that Flows from it

In addition to moving in order to find more suitable housing or employment, the youth explained in detail who else, besides family members, that often lived with them. One female, in describing her and her mother's situation, stated "I guess she [mother] needed a bigger place to take care of me at. Her two friends were helping her pay rent at an apartment, they lived with us." This description was reflective of many of the other youths living situations. Less that five-percent of the youth stated that their early home life was comprised of a nuclear family; the majority of the youth always had extended family or friends living with them. This fact was directly related to another theme prevalent throughout the youth's narratives – abuse in the home.

Many of the youth openly told stories of how they suffered from physical and/or sexual abuse at the hands of extended family members or friends of parents that were living in the same house:

> "I was raped by my uncle and two other guys in our house. When I was only 11-years-old. I mean what do you do when it happens in your own home. Especially when its family. Know what I mean?"

This tragic story was told by a female who, today, is a positive and outgoing woman. Reflecting back on her experience she told us that abuse such as this is frequent, at least from what she witnessed in her earlier years. Perhaps equally as troubling as the assault itself is the culture of secrecy that follows. This female youth and a few other youths (male and female) explained how they were instructed by adults in their home or elders within their communities not to speak out or tell anyone about the abuse because of the damage it would cause to their family and community.

The theme of physical and sexual abuse was not strictly linked to the family home. Many of the youth participants were placed in foster homes for various durations of time. Within the walls of a place that should have been a safe environment for the youth, some of the youth explained how the abuse followed them into the foster homes:

> "When the foster care came when I was turning 11, it was a couple who were both accountants and they had their son, and an adopted son and they treated them better than me. The oldest son was into drugs and was trying to force me to do them, and then he started molesting me and stuff. So he beat me up and said if I told anybody he would do worse, so I said I fell downstairs. So they moved me to another foster home [...] and it was really bad there. It's a pretty nice neighbourhood, but there was a lot of gangs and I

was introduced to things I shouldn't have been and I started getting molested in that one pretty regularly for a solid year."

This youths story was not an isolated one; other youth also described abuse they suffered while in detention centres and other foster homes. Following a lengthy discussion on abuse inside and outside of the family home, without being asked to do so, the youth in one research circle went on to discuss the history of colonialism and the effects it has had on their communities. This demonstrated to us that these youths are cognizant of their circumstances and are aware of the historical events that have led to them living on their respective reserves.

The youth often referred to the trauma that has been passed down through each generation as a result of colonialism. After one youth explained how him and his mother moved a lot when he was younger because of a lack of money, we asked what his mothers early life was like, to which he responded:

> "hard, lots of violence, moving here and there. It was a lot like mine. You know. And her parents were the same too. It doesn't get better."

This statement, along with many others shared, demonstrated to us that the majority of youth we interviewed did not just become homeless, nor did a single event trigger their transition into homelessness, rather, it is a process that has unfolded over time:

> "I think residential schools; colonization has a huge impact on the homelessness that we deal with. Sexual abuse, physical abuse, like our parents don't know how to deal with it and they take it out on us. Everything is inter-generational. Everything we do today, being assimilated, not allowing us to be who we are. It's just passed on, handed down. It's a bad cycle we are in."

The youth explain that a result of the generations before them suffering from poverty, abuse, and a lack of resources on-reserve, the youth participants here are affected by factors outside of their control. That is not to say that all the youth we talked with slowly transitioned into a sense of homelessness.

There were a few youths that shared tragic stories with us, revealing heart wrenching events, that ultimately led the youth to becoming homeless as a result of that single event. However, the youths explaining these events were sure to articulate that there were underlying circumstances that culminated in the tragic events that caused them to become homeless. When we asked a 16-year-old male what caused him to become or feel homeless, he replied "uh, it was when my dad killed my mother." Extreme violence such as this was unfortunately frequent amongst the stories told. Youth described physical fights between them and parents or other family members, sometimes involving weapons.

IV.   Support Systems the Youth had in their Early Lives

Following these stories that the youth shared about their early lives, youth were then invited to discuss any support systems they had in their early home lives. The overwhelming response was that the youth and their families did not have any formal access to support structures such as a counsellor, case workers, or an Aboriginal outreach centre. However, the majority of the youth responded that they had family members they could turn to for help when times got too tough.

For the youth that were engaged with formal support systems, the support was less than ideal:
> "I would have my social worker who took me out once a month, but nothing like therapy or anything. She didn't get too involved. I internalized all my stuff. I had these feelings of my foster brothers doing this stuff to me and feeling like am I gay because this is happening to me? And after a while I like, I put a gun to his face and said it had to stop. I ended up leaving a bit after that I just couldn't take it anymore. But yah, like I said you don't get help the way you need it."

Other youth also explained how the agencies or support workers they were involved with at an early age seemed to lack empathy towards the youth. One research circle involved extensive talk about how school counsellors and social development workers did not actively seek out and engage with them, as Aboriginal youth. Rather, the youth were frustrated by the fact that if they wanted help or needed someone to talk to, they would have to initiate a conversation with a school guidance counsellor or call an assistance hotline.

For the youth that wanted assistance or support from a counsellor or the government, the youth described situations in which it was impossible for them to get the help needed:
> "My parents didn't qualify for social assistance. They made some money. Enough to get denied help, but still stay poor. It was mostly my mom's family, my grandfather was pretty well off, but it was definitely a lot of burden on my mom's side of the family to help us financially."

It is clear from the narratives provided by these youths that they have seen and experienced much. Extreme poverty, various forms of abuse, witnessing and experiencing addictions to drugs and alcohol, and having loved ones die in front of them, are all things that no youth should have to experience. Yet, many of the youth participants in this project have. Amazingly however, they have survived to tell their stories. This, in spite of the lack of formal support systems to help them along their journey. The following topic transitions into a theme that focuses on how experiencing homelessness has affected the youth.

Between Then and Now: How the Transition to Homelessness Affected the Youth and how the Youths Lived After

This portion of the interview explored the youths lives since becoming homeless. We were interested in hearing more about what caused them to be homeless, how the transition took place

and how they survived after that transition. A number of familiar sub-themes permeated this theme, as well as a number of the overarching themes of the report.

The first question asked the youth to discuss when they first began to experience a sense of homelessness and how their experience of homelessness has affected them. The responses of the youth were varied. Many youths explained how they have always felt like they have been homeless to some degree:

> "I have always, ever since I can remember, I have always lived in poverty. I have never eaten every day, that's always been a thing, finding something to eat... I mean I've slept in bus stops, I've seen the stares. Ever since I was thirteen I've done everything I could do to survive."

While for others it was due to the fact that their family moved from place to place frequently or because their family had to live in poverty, as one participant stated when asked when she first felt she was homeless:

> "When we had an apartment in town, and we were evicted. We had gone home in a taxi and saw the note that said we were evicted on the door. The doors were locked; the windows were locked. My mom found a way to get in but there was no working power, no water or anything. We were homeless."

This is itself indicative of the sorts of broad, systemic and intergenerational issues that plague Aboriginal communities in Canada.

I.   Events that Caused the Youths to Experience Homelessness

For the youth that did not always feel this sense of homelessness, we asked what caused them to experience homelessness. The overwhelming view of the youth was that there was no one event or experience that caused them to feel homeless. Rather, an aggregate of factors such as a lack of housing on their respective reserves, financial hardships that caused their family to move around a lot, abuse or drug issues that caused the youth to temporarily leave their family home, or exiting a corrections facility or similar institution, were all cited as factors that caused the youth to feel a sense of homelessness. These sorts of factors which have their roots in historical and cultural trauma, were much more prevalent than traumatic events. Although there were a few participants who experienced a traumatic event which caused them to first experience homelessness, for example a youth whose mother was murdered by his father in a murder-suicide, and another whose father inflicted one too many vicious assaults against him:

> "About 8 years ago my parents started drinking and fighting again, so I came down to the house to take care of my mother. I was afraid my father would show up and they'd start fighting, and I'd have to fight with my dad. It's happened three times. It's gotten so bad that he got put in a hospital. Anyway this time he threw a bench off the patio, split my head open, broke

> my shoulder, knocked me out for however long. So we don't talk at all. Off
> and on they'll drink and they'll fight, now that I'm on parole it's just hard, I
> have to stay away."

This youth went on to state that it was this act of violence that ultimately caused him to be displaced from his community, a situation where he found himself having to sell drugs to survive in the city. This decision to sell drugs eventually lead to him serving 4 years in a federal penitentiary, which further isolated him from his community. This sort of community isolation is something that a number of the participants who had gone through the criminal justice system experienced. Mandatory half-way housing is only available in urban settings[23] and therefore far removed from the rural reserve.

II.   The Effects of Experiencing Homelessness

Next we asked the youth how their experience of homelessness has affected them; again, the responses varied. A number of participants cited a dependency on drugs and alcohol that resulted as a coping mechanism. A consequential result of this drug and/or alcohol use was that a high number of these youth have as a result served time inside a correction facility. Seventeen of the youth described how they have served time inside of either a youth detention centre, a provincial jail, or federal penitentiary after first experiencing homelessness.

Furthermore, other participants stated a decreased sense of self-worth and trouble with inter-personal relationships.

> "It honestly attacked my self-worth. It's still affecting me today. Like even
> though I've got some things together my self-worth isn't good. I'm 22 years
> old, I should be looking at a beautiful future. But I'm still in high school, I
> need to do things that I didn't do then. It sucks, its rough. My anxiety is shit. I
> job search and I get mad because people see a resume in my hand and I think
> like they don't think I'm good enough. I get so mad, so I just leave."

Another participant spoke of how it affected her personal relationships,

> "I feel like when I make relationships with people I don't want them to know
> this part of me, but I also want them too, because I want them to know
> everything. It's affected personal relationships with my ex-boyfriend of two
> years, like the whole time it was like he should know all these things about my
> past and being homeless. That relationship was good at first, but when I started
> feeling like I could open up to him he would just use it against me and it was
> really bad. Now with relationships I just don't tell them. Some people can
> handle it, and some can't."

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[23] In New Brunswick the only half-way houses are in Fredericton, Saint John, and Moncton.

Homelessness for our participants is something that has no concrete beginning and end. Even though it has been years for some of the participants since they were in a situation of unsecured or no housing the affects are still felt. As one participant spoke it is clear how she was not only displaced from her community (in a geographical sense), but also from her family as a result of her experience.

> "Another big thing was when they [Child Protection] took me away, I wish they could have gotten my mother help so maybe I could have moved back with her. So she could get help and we could have a better relationship. Then maybe I could have avoided all of this, going through the group homes, juvey, dropping out of school, drugs, drinking. But she didn't and now I can't go back, I'm in a good place and I don't want to risk falling back."

This displacement affects not only familial relationships, but for some participants all relationships, as one 16-year-old participant explained:

> [Interviewer]
> What's the big difference living on-reserve and living off-reserve?
> [Youth]
> Honestly, its' friends and no friends. Living on reserve means friends. Living off reserve means complete isolation.
> [Interviewer]
> How do you think that affects you living off the reserve?
> [Youth]
> Honestly, I can't handle living off the reserve and the isolation. Sometimes I need the sense of comfort, probably why I jump around all the time but stay on the reserve.

III.   Surviving Homelessness: The Positives and Negatives of the Experience

The final question we asked the youths in this section was how they have survived after their transition into homelessness. It was meant as a lead in question to the next section on Assistance but we received some pretty interesting answers. Instead of focusing on services they have used, the majority of the youths interpreted the question as surviving in an emotional/spiritual sense. Despite the fact that forty-percent of the youth have forcibly spent time inside of some form of correctional facility, the youth remain positive and upbeat. Unexpectedly, nearly half the youth participants explained how their experiences have made them stronger. They went on to explain that by going through their struggles and hard times, it has made them appreciate what they have in life and the people they have surrounding them today:

> "Being incarcerated gave me time to think about my options and my paths. So after weighting my options I chose to give Fredericton a try. I was released from jail and I chose to come to Fredericton because of the post-secondary education and work opportunities, and to escape my previous environment. This is the city I'm going to build my life in. I planned the

> work I need to do, and now I am working the plan. I landed a job this week.
> I've got my applications to St. Thomas University, and the navy done, I'm
> just waiting on my transcripts, which should be in soon."

Despite all this youth has been through, physical and sexual abuse, the displacement from community and family, being incarcerated for 4 years, he still has a positive outlook and views his homeless experience as a learning experience and this speaks to the feelings of hope, ambition, and optimism so many of our participants exhibited.

It was not all positive though. The negative effects of the youth's homeless experience were evident upon more close examination. The youth interviewed had developed strategies in order to avoid certain situations, some with very negative consequences. Drugs and alcohol were cited as a way of "dealing with" or "surviving" being homeless. This can be seen in how the youth developed interpersonal relationships.

> "I think it's effected my ability to have a relationship with a girl, but I still
> can like go out. I just can't like, you know when you have a girlfriend she
> wants to know what you're doing and where you're sleeping and I can't
> answer those things. They ask too many questions; they want to know too
> much."

Another youth spoke to the same point regarding her experience of homelessness and its effects on her relationships:

> "It's the worst experience ever. You don't want to tell anyone, or be like oh
> 'hey man I'm sleeping in the woods can I come sleep on your couch'. It's
> just embarrassing. I felt ashamed, I didn't want anyone to know what
> happened. It's a lot easier to do that, rather then to tell my family that I had
> failed."

We even heard how some youth would avoid using services for the homeless rather than face the social stigma. One female youth who had used various forms of social assistance as a way to tackle homelessness in the past has found herself on the brink of being without a place to live again and does not want to use these services again, saying, "once you've been on assistance it's almost embarrassing to go back, and you don't want your kids to see you on it." While another youth who had also utilized assistance, in this case the Fredericton Food Bank, felt shame after doing so:

> "I would go down to the food bank and get some food with my friend, I felt
> like I really didn't belong there because all the people were homeless, like
> straight up homeless, living in the street. So I was just like freaked out, and I
> felt kind of bad about that. Here I was wearing some rich kid clothes and
> whatever, I felt like I didn't need it as bad as they did."

Throughout the interviews/research circles the youth stressed the point through their narratives that homelessness, for them, has not been an event but rather a way of describing their lives. If

homelessness did not begin for them at early childhood, as it did for many of the youth, it began later, but all youth shared how once it began it has never left them. Some of the effects of their homeless experience are far-reaching but as the youth told us, there are both positive and negative effects of their experience. The next theme delves more deeply into the assistance used by the youths as they navigated homelessness.

Assistance: What help did the Youth receive during their Struggles?

In this section we delved deeper into the youth's experiences and tried to extract detailed information about the services they utilized or any assistance they received throughout their experience of homelessness. We started by asking the youths what assistance or services they have utilized, and some of the answers were quite shocking. A number of youth described how there was either nothing available in terms of services or assistance or that they chose not to utilize them:

> "There's absolutely nothing. On the reserve they have drug and alcohol groups. But they even pick and choose who they want to help. Like it's so stupid. I've been going to NA [Narcotics Anonymous] and AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] and I do whatever, and I contacted them. But they won't help."

> "I don't know, I really like, I don't like to ask any of those people for help. I just try and do it all on my own."

> "I can't get social assistance, no, I don't know the age that you can, maybe nineteen."

> "No I've just struggled through it. "

> "I never used them. I think my pride just got in the way."

This lack of knowledge or refusal to utilize services was a definite theme for some youth throughout the interviews/research circles. Given that so many of the youth have been displaced in some way, particularly geographically, the result has been a sort of disorientation that prevents or creates a barrier in accessing services. Most of the youth did not grow up in the urban centre they are currently living in, and they therefore are not aware of what is available or where to look to see if something is available. Also, as was seen in the last section, strategies to avoid the social stigma associated with homelessness are a way for the youth to survive homelessness but at the same time these strategies can also act as a barrier to receiving services or assistance as can be seen in the above quotes.

Other youth did utilize a number of services/assistance, and had a good experience with them. The John Howard Society was a staple for the seventeen men who had been incarcerated at some point during their homeless experience, as a number of youth explained,

"I went to some counselling with the girlfriend one time, like at the John Howard society. I got my flag license there too. I did anger management one time when I was younger. The resume thing there was great, it has actually helped me."

"John Howard society. I found out about it when I was on parole. I just went there because I knew they had some hot meals."

"The only things I've only ever used is John Howard, and those people got me housing out of jail."

"I've done like the W.E.S.T. program and stuff through John Howard, which like getting me job skills has helped. Definitely john Howard with the housing. I was paying 300 dollars a month for a three-bedroom apartment which was really good. I haven't really been in too many programs. The W.E.S.T. program is "work employability skills training". It's just like school classes, strengthen your math and English and teach you budgeting and proper work etiquette and stuff. Coming to an interview, like slouching, or talking in ways you shouldn't."

"The halfway houses, which are through the John Howard Society, who have also been supportive in my life. I always knew them, and they always really liked me. Seen potential in me, I just would give up on myself early. They are definitely a major support, always keeping me in line. They were starting up on apartments for me, for subsidized rent. This time like I got out, and felt different about myself, wanted a different life, just didn't know how. Being an adult, they could help me now. Couldn't really when I was a kid. There are way more avenues as an adult."

The last quote speaks to one of the barriers the youth frequently encountered throughout their homeless experience. There exists a gap in services between the age of 12-17 years of age, and many of the youth experienced this in someway.

"It's really difficult for kids from twelve to seventeen. Because no one looks at them. They wait until their eighteen and full addicted on dope or uppers. And that's the way it is because that's how I was. If I had an intervention at twelve or thirteen it would have helped."

I.   A Lack of Assistance for Youth Age 12 to 17

This gap had some youth concerned about the next generation. A big factor for a lot of youth living on-reserve and getting into trouble was a lack of positive direction or activities. One youth explained how it is not just services for drug and alcohol addiction that need to be addressed but more proactive or preventative schemes:

"A lot on our reserve is young kids, and adults. But the age group of 12-17 they're in limbo. You're pretty much getting set up for failure... Like for minor hockey, you can get funding for minor hockey. But as soon as they go up in age the funding

> stops. Like, come on, it's expensive. You have to buy all the equipment. This is
> why kids start playing so young, and then at 14 their parents can't afford hockey
> anymore."

A reoccurring theme throughout the interviews/research circles was that assistance is reaching the youth too late. We asked each youth what could have helped their family when they were younger, before a lot of the negative aspects of homelessness touched them personally, and many of them spoke of simple interventions or assistance that could have had the potential for them to avoid homelessness all together. Looking back the youth who spoke on this issue did not want more, but different services/assistance, or services/assistance that intervened earlier.

> "I was never that type of that kid that wished I was rich. I was the one who wished
> we were well enough to live comfortably. There's obviously a lot of programs that
> help people but I think that if like social services would intervene a little bit more,
> because they chose times to intervene when they shouldn't, or they let people who
> are full out addicts still have their kids. Like I should have never lived with my
> parents ever, I should have stayed in foster care. I don't regret leaving foster care,
> but I don't really know what would have helped us except for them coming around
> a bit more to check on us or like more of a big brother program."

Another youth, who had been in group homes and then a juvenile detention facility as a result of her mother's drug and alcohol abuse was asked what would have helped when she was a child:

> "Umm, like lots of things would have helped. If there was food. Would have helped
> if I had new clothes for school, new books. She [her mother] didn't have addictions
> like she did. That she had somebody who could come and talk to her to try and snap
> some sense into her."

But this youth, after years of neglect and abuse, was put into a group home at the age of twelve and was never able to return home because her mother never received the services she needed.

II. The Importance of Individuals within Service Providers/Organizations

A number of youth cited a lack of "someone to talk to" as an important service that is lacking, particularly on-reserve where kinship factionalism made it difficult for some youth to navigate who they could talk to and what they could say, as one youth with an alcoholic and mentally abusive mother spoke to:

> "I think if there was like more people that I felt I could talk to when I was younger,
> outside of my family, that would have helped. We had a youth center, but everyone
> you see there is from the reserve, so you don't want to be telling them about your
> family. So if there are people there you don't really know, at any time at the youth
> center that would have been awesome. Because I didn't want anyone telling my
> mom or something. Like my mom is pretty well known on the reserve, and they all
> liked her. I didn't want to give my mom a bad name."

Something that arose out of the interviews in Saint John, NB was the importance of individual service providers on the lives of homeless Aboriginal youth and the impact they can have. Four of the five youth interviewed in Saint John had all come into contact with a particular service provider (we will call her "Jane") that went above and beyond what any of these youth had experienced before from service providers. Most of the youth first came into contact with her while in Portage, but reconnected with her at the Teen Resource Centre in Saint John. One youth told of what Jane did for him:

> "With everybody else, social workers and stuff, I knew that at the end of the day they had a job to do and they didn't realize how I felt. But with [Jane] she genuinely cares about everyone she comes into contact with, especially youth. She would take everybody she could and take them to a farm just to get them away from everything. So they can just live. She really wants to make a difference. She made me feel accepted, instead of being a job. She made me feel like a family member, she seen me as a person, for who I was. Which was a scared little kid, not this hard looking person people thought I was. She was the first one to break the walls, she did the work to get in. She didn't push me to the side like everyone else did."

This section highlighted some of the assistance or services the youth utilized. The spectrum of services and/or assistance was not great, but those that were utilized by the youth seemed to have served their purpose and had a positive impact on their lives. Generally speaking, most of the youth felt that the services/assistance they received, whether it was Portage, group-homes, Child and Family services, etc. was too late in their lives to be a meaningful intervention. Furthermore, a number of youth specifically brought up the lack of intervention in their early home lives as being a critical factor in their homelessness.

What could be done better - Youth suggestions for moving forward

Finally, we asked the youth what they would do moving forward if they were government, policy makers, or Aboriginal service providers. Specifically, we asked the youth how the needs of Aboriginal youth could be better addressed moving forward? The responses varied greatly, ranging from cultural practices that require no economic cost to implement, to employment training and housing services that are greatly lacking in the eyes of these youth.

I.   Access to Cultural Practices off Reserve

Three female youth explained how the inclusion of cultural and spiritual activities starting at an early age would help to prevent much of the struggles the youth participants went through:

> "introduce your language of culture early on in the pregnancy and you would chant and drum the child during birth. Then you would save the placenta and do the burial in the

community, then you would do the blessing and the sweat lodge and give them their spirit name so they were brought into this world with spirituality and would be stronger. So before puberty they would do a one day fast, like it's a rite of passage. All of this would help guide us through our entire lives."

When we inquired why these practices were important to the youth, a male youth interjected, with approval from the rest of the research circle:

"Culture has a strong impact on us. We are who we are from our people. Once you lose your way from our people you're just confused. Most of the teachings today don't work with us, we have our own teachings. So we need these things she mentioned to help us stay on track."

Additionally, these female youths explained how access to cultural practices when they were pregnant would have helped. This would include having a traditional First Nation ceremony on or off-reserve, depending upon where the youth lived. It is important to note that these female youths clarified that these practices are not strictly linked to their reserve communities, rather, the cultural practices would be beneficial to youth living on or off-reserve. Additional cultural practices the youth would like to see consistently available to them are: sweat lodges, prayers, smudging, sweet grass, and stories from elders. These youths expressed sadness because much of their cultural practices have been lost within their communities, and explained that a side-effect of that is a lack of focus and connectedness later on in life.

II.   Ensure Service Workers Receive Cultural Sensitivity Training

A recommendation that frequently appeared was to have service workers (of agencies/ organizations – whether Aboriginal or not) that actually cared about them and not simply workers who "see it as a job", and this speaks to the feelings of disconnectedness that they generally feel. There definitely was a theme in the interviews that youth who had encountered a social worker or counsellor "who went above and beyond", seemed to be in a better place than those youths who had not encounter such service providers. This told us, as researchers, that even if there are formal support systems or organizations in place to assist these youths, it is the people working there that ultimately make the difference. The types of organizations or support these youths say is needed moving forward vary greatly.

III.   Improve Access to Affordable Housing Off Reserve

Housing was a top priority for a majority of the youth. As ninety-five percent of the youth transitioned from on-reserve to an off-reserve setting, housing was a great need for them:

"I think affordable housing should be top of the list, and I think a raise in the allowance that they give. Like social assistance and stuff, it barely pays just your rent, unless you're already in affordable housing, but if you're not, it's not paying for rent. And if you have

to pay your rent each month then it's your power bill that doesn't get paid for two or three months because you just can't afford both."

Youth repeatedly stated that social assistance received while living off-reserve was not enough to pay for suitable accommodations, let alone utilities and food. This was especially true for the youth who served time in jail or prison. Following their incarceration, the youth explained how they were mandatorily sent to half-way houses. It was during the time at these temporary housing units that the youth were expected to save money to get a place of there own. This was a time they were expected to save money for suitable clothing in order to attend job interviews. Ultimately, what we heard was that the money received by these youth, in the form of social assistance from either the province or their band, was not enough to find housing off-reserve. The result for many of the youth was to couch surf or rent a one-bedroom apartment with numerous other people.

IV. Advertise the Off-Reserve Services/Programs Currently Available

Linked to the recommendations for improving access to affordable off-reserve housing was the awareness of the services currently available:

> "There are places where natives can access help but not their white friends. To help like, there's an organization Skigin-Elnoog, not a lot of people are aware of that, or people are becoming aware."

This youth was aware of Skigin-Elnoog, but only became aware after spending years experiencing homelessness. The youth in one research circle articulated how this lack of awareness regarding the services and programs actually in existence is a major reason for their continued sense of homelessness. Unless the youth were raised on social assistance they weren't aware of how to apply for, or receive such help:

> "I just called the 1-800 number, I just looked it up. Its just word of mouth I guess. Like I knew so many people on it that I just asked. I mean we grew up on it so I knew all about it, like my family only knew social assistance, it's just what we grew up on. But, I know people who don't have a clue what to do when they need help because they [government] don't want you to know. I think all these programs on and off our communities need to be known about and not like hear it from one person. There's so much red tape to get into everything."

This became even clearer when we asked what advice the youth would have for someone going through the living situations:

> "I would tell them to do their research before anything, like research what government and your band offers, and see what the better option is. Because if you are part of a band and you want to pursue post-secondary education or get living help your band is going to give you a living allowance, probably more than you could get through assistance through the government. But you've gotta do the research or you won't know."

We raised this issue with the second research circle to gain the perspective of more youths on their knowledge of programs and services available to them. The majority of the youth stated that besides welfare from their band or social assistance from the government, they did not know of many programs to help them. We then invited the youth to discuss what programs and services they feel should be in place moving forward.

V.   Develop Programs/Services for Age Group 12 to 17 Off-Reserve

Youth in each research circle identified a specific age group – 12 to 17 – as the group of youth that services providers and government should be focusing on. Youth identified this age group as the most at risk, and identified this group as the age bracket currently lacking the most in accessible services.

The youth went on to say it is after-school recreational programs that would assist this age bracket greatly. One youth cited urban Friendship Centres as a space he has used successfully before. He explained that having a place like that to just hang-out at was a way to avoid the drugs and alcohol involved in his age group outside of the Friendship Centre. The youth want these outreach or access centres to be open to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth alike:

> "When I was off-reserve I didn't have programs and stuff like that sounds appealing. Something that they'll like to do and enjoy going to. All kids can go, like not just native's. Off-reserve native too, and white kids."

That youth explained how he would avoid an Aboriginal youth centre if available, because most of his friends are non-Aboriginal, and he doesn't feel like they would be welcomed. Another youth, who has a small child of her own, explained:

> "Send them [children aged 12-17] to a place where they can play and have supper, they don't have to pay for it, they can just go. Like if they do come up with those things for off reserve they make people go. At risk youth on and off reserve need a place. I just don't want to do it just for on reserve kids. My kids hang around with off reserve kids, I did too. That's the majority of who my friends were. To make a thing just for native kids and their kids are on the outside, they might not want to go to the service. They need to open it for everything."

It is clear to see that these youth view structures such as a Friendship Centre or a Boys and Girls Club as a valuable tool for youth aged 12-17. Further, to ensure the youth will actually utilize such services, they recommend promoting such agencies and advertising that non-Aboriginal youth are equally as welcome. Without services such as these, the youth stated that youth in the future are at risk to crime, drugs, alcohol, and potentially a life involving time incarcerated. They explain that by government and service providers waiting until youth reach their twenties it is too late.

VI. Improve the Services and Financial Assistance for Youth Exiting Correctional Facilities

Following the discussion on what services are required to prevent these youths from falling into trouble and experiencing homelessness, the youth then discussed services and organizations available after being incarcerated:

> "They [jail] give you programs in there and set you up for when you get out. But really all they do is send you to the parole office or halfway house."

The youth explained how this wasn't enough to get them back on their feet and gain employment. Multiple stories were told of how parole officers would arrange for a job interview, only to have the employer tell the youth they were not going to be hired because of their criminal records. Following those demeaning and embarrassing encounters, a few youths stated that's when they gave up and didn't want to continue. The result was them reoffending and being sent back inside an institution. Other stories were told of the time when they exited the criminal justice system:

> "The halfway houses, which are through the John Howard Society, who have also been supportive in my life. I always knew them, and they always really liked me. Seen potential in me, I just would give up on myself early. They are definitely a major support, always keeping me in line. They were starting up on apartments for me, for subsidized rent. This time like I got out, and felt different about myself, wanted a different life, just didn't know how. *Being an adult, they could help me now. Couldn't really help when I was a kid.* There are way more avenues as an adult. They just look at you when you're a kid and think you just need to change your life without helping you in anyway."

This quote says a lot; first, it echoes the previous comments of there being more services in place for adults than there is for youth. Second, this youth actually points out the positives of his and others experience with the John Howard Society. In addition to this organization, other youths cited the Portage substance abuse program as a place where they have received invaluable assistance. However, the youths went on to explain that no matter how helpful these organizations are, they are often far removed from their home communities. For example, we had youth from reserves communities in the North Eastern part of New Brunswick who were staying in half-way houses in Fredericton. There were also youth from the Western part of the Province who were seeking addictions assistance a few hundred kilometres away. Ultimately, the youth recommend services closer to their home communities for when they are released from a correctional facility, or for when they are in need of addictions services.

Further suggestions from the youth also relate to this theme of bringing services into their reserve communities. At least a full hour during two separate research circles was consumed of talk by the youth, regarding services and programs they want brought into their respective reserves. Youth explained how it is difficult for people like them to seek out education or employment training because those services are offered off their reserves, often many hours drive away:

"There is no reason you should have to move off reserve or move to another province to take a trade. They could bring somebody in [to the reserve]. It would be cheaper to bring someone in to the reserve and do the course for the people wanting to take it, than it would be to send people from a reserve off on their own to a new place with nothing to help them. I'm sure if they looked into it, they have empty band spaces. There is no problem there to find a guy to come in for like a yearlong course. If they pay one guys rent in town, I'm sure it'd be subsidized through the government."

The youth in these research circles seem to have put a lot of thought into the discussions surrounding the services and training opportunities needed on-reserve. They repeatedly recommended that we write about the lack of job training skills on-reserve, and for us to focus on how the move off-reserve to attend trades training at places such as the New Brunswick Community College (NBCC) results in a feeling of isolation. Optimally, the youth would like to see more job skills programs brought to their communities. In the alternative, the youth explained that if they have to attend places such as NBCC off-reserve, there needs to be increased awareness by the school administration regarding the specific needs of Aboriginal students.

VII.   Bring all Services and Programs Available Together Under One Roof

Linked to this recommendation of bringing services on to the reserves, was the suggestions by youth that the services currently in place for them be brought together under one umbrella:

"All the services offered on-reserve are separate, it should be a holistic approach working together. Like, its government funded. I mean even this project it's like on homelessness but it's so much more too. Everything needs to be said at a table and with everyone there, for all services. They just want to divide and conquer."

This youth, along with others in her research circle, were frustrated at how the programs and services on and off-reserve are offered by different organizations. The youth said that by having services such that address addictions, housing, educational guidance, and employment training all offered through different Aboriginal or government organizations/service providers, this results in a lack of communication between the various service providers. One youth described how she was receiving assistance for employment training through one off-reserve Aboriginal organization, but a different Aboriginal organization assisting her with education was completely unaware of the former. She explained that all of these services are linked – for her, it was job skills training that overlapped. She was being taught the same thing, from two different service providers. She viewed this as a waste of money and resources. Explaining that if the services were offered under one roof so to speak, there would be less miscommunication between service providers, and less money wasted.

At the end of one research circle we asked the youth if they would like to address anything we had not already discussed:

"I wouldn't wish it on anybody, even someone I didn't like. Being homeless, not knowing where you're going to sleep, and trying to break into someone's shed. Like there's been times I've had to sleep on the boat or slept leaning up against a tree because it was just hard you know. A lot of that is to do with being on drugs. I would just, if there were more things out there that young people could turn too. Even from seminars where people talk, where they're talking about their life, if there's more of those out there so when people are young and can hear it from people who have already been through it. I mean you might think it's cool at first cause your friends are doing it. But you end up in jail. There needs to be programs to help kids like us."

Ultimately, the youth we interviewed want to see more attention paid to, what is from their perspective, the vulnerable age group of 12-17. They want training and skills programs brought into their reserve communities. Additionally, they want those services already in existence to be amalgamated into one over-arching service provider, in order to cut out much of the unnecessary red tape. If they have to move off-reserve, or are forced to, the youth want drop-in-centres or recreational centres that are sensitive to their Aboriginal culture and beliefs. And perhaps most importantly, to help rectify their personal situations, these youths see a great need for more Aboriginal housing, on and off-reserve. Further, for the many youths already living in an off-reserve setting, the youth recommend that policy makers take a close look at how little financial assistance these youths actually receive per month.

Summary

A total of 43 youths contributed their stories and recommendations to this report. 41 of these 43 youths are from reserve communities in either New Brunswick or Nova Scotia. Currently, they are all residing in one of the three cities in which we carried out research circles: Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John. 15 of the youth were female and 28 were male. The age range of the youth participants spanned 16-30, with the average age being 24.

All of the 43 youth explained how they experienced poverty in their early lives. Additionally, the majority of the youth cited alcohol, drug, physical, or sexual abuse as an obstacle they had to face in their early home lives. Each youth told us their story; describing how they experienced homelessness, how it affected them, how they lived afterwards, and what suggestions they have for government and services providers. Homelessness for these youth is a process, rather than it being a single event that happened all of a sudden.

The youth described how their families frequently moved from on-reserve communities to an off-reserve home, and back again. The youth stated that this occurred due to a lack of housing on-reserve. As a result, the youth recommend that additionally funding be channeled into the housing requirements for reserve communities. Further, for those that want to move off-reserve, the youth explained how they cannot afford to do so because of the lack of funding they receive to make the transition.

The youth and their immediate families would often live with extended families or friends on the reserves due to the lack of housing. A side effect of this was physical and/or sexual abuse

inflicted on the youth, often at the hands of extended family members or friends living within the home. The youth explained that when they would tell a trusted family member about the abuse, they were often told to keep quiet because if the news got out it would bring unnecessary attention or disruption to the family or community. This "culture of secrecy" needs to be addressed according to the youth, and have support systems implemented on and off-reserve where the youth can turn to when faced with abuse such as this.

In addition to the lack of housing on-reserve, the youth described band office politics as another reason for their sense of homelessness. Many youths described this as "band office favoritism". And unless the youth's family had a family member within the band office, the youth's family was unlikely to obtain housing on-reserve. The youth weren't able to supply us with a recommendation for how to address this issue, however, they were clear that it is something that needs to be remedied.

Another contributing factor to the constant transition between on and off-reserve was the lack of employment opportunities on-reserve. Many youths explained how their parent(s) would often move off-reserve in search of employment, only to have to move back to the reserve community because they could not afford to live off reserve. Related to this topic was "training for employment". These youths would like to see employment training programs implemented within their reserve communities. Instead of have numerous youth move off reserve to attend an institution such as the New Brunswick Community College, the youth stated how it would be more efficient to bring one instructor to the reserve.

In addition to the lack of housing, minimal employment opportunities, and the abuse within the home, the youths identified another issue that ultimately contributed to their sense of homelessness: the lack of services and programs available on and off-reserve to youth aged 12 to 17. The youth participants described this age group as the most vulnerable and in need of assistance within their communities. Many youths described that if they would have had access to a Friendship Centre, a Boys and Girls Club, or some other form of outreach centre, that it would likely have helped prevent them from getting involved with drugs and alcohol, and ultimately have avoided time in a correctional facility.

The problem from the youth's perspective is that nobody (service providers or case workers) reaches out to them until its too late. The majority of the youth stated that there are more programs and services directed at adults than there are youths, when the focus should be on addressing issues before the person reaches adulthood. On and off-reserve alike, the youths describe a great lack of services for this age group. From their perspective it would not take much to correct this gap; having a physical space where the youth can gather to play games and talk with empathetic service providers would make a great difference.

Many of the youths experienced their sense of homelessness in a correctional facility. 17 of the 43 youth participants were incarcerated in either a juvenile facility, provincial jail, or federal penitentiary. The youths described the support systems in place for them upon being released from a correctional facility as another area of major concern. They explained that following their time in prison they would be sent to a halfway house. It was in the halfway houses that the youth are expected to save money in order to find their own accommodations after their time in the

halfway houses ended. However, all the youth who have experienced this cite a major lack in financial assistance as a barrier to obtaining accommodations. For example, the youths explained that their monthly assistance income is not enough to pay for a one-bedroom apartment, let alone food, clothing, and transportation. As a result, the youth explained that after being released from a correctional facility they would often fall back into a life of drugs and crime in order to support themselves financially.

Ultimately, the youth participants described their lives as having far too many struggles, with not nearly enough support systems in place. The general themes of poverty, abuse, lack of housing, and the immediate need for increased assistance permeated the research circles. However, there is much more to the youth's stories than provided here. Upon analyzing each youth's narrative, we looked deeper into the barriers these youths faced and the changes required moving forward to address these barriers.

Our Recommendations

In addition to the recommendations put forward by the youth interviewed for this project, there are a number of recommendations we as researchers wish to put forward as well. Having engaged with the topic of Aboriginal youth homelessness for the past five months a number of issues arose.

1. The first was that Aboriginal youth homelessness is an immensely complex issue that requires significantly more research. We have two recommendations in this regard. First, another study is needed to examine the rest of the province. Unfortunately this project was limited to the southern half of the province and only three urban centres within that area. New Brunswick is a diverse province and as such the barriers, supports, and challenges homeless Aboriginal youth face in the different geographic regions may differ greatly. Second, there is no shortage of homeless Aboriginal youth in this province and another study is needed simply to hear as many narratives as possible. This project was limited to forty-three youths and by the end of the project we were turning away youth daily. Methodologically this project focused on the experiential, it was narrative based and that is exactly what these youth want, to tell their story. The more narratives heard the greater the success of the project. Another project with a greater timeframe would allow the researchers to delve further into the participants stories. In the writing of the report there was such an immense amount of data that it was impossible to include everything due to time constraints.

2. The next recommendations have to do with the substance of what we heard as researchers from the Aboriginal youth who were interviewed. The first recommendation comes from a piece of data that was a surprise to us; forty-one of the forty-three participants (or 95%) were from a reserve (in that they initially lived on the reserve). In a country where over 50% of the Aboriginal population is now urbanized (in other words off-reserve), this data could indicate that the homeless Aboriginal population is disproportionately coming from the reserve Aboriginal community (depending on the percentage of urbanized Aboriginals who were born and initially lived on reserve). Regardless, this statistic from

the project shows that the forced displacement of Aboriginal peoples is still functioning in New Brunswick. Therefore, we reaffirm that steps be taken to prevent the forced relocation/displacement of Aboriginal peoples. A main point brought up by many participants was the lack of suitable housing on reserve. Whether it was a story about not being able to find any housing on reserve or living in a single family dwelling with two bedrooms and ten people, the solution is more funding for housing on reserve and/or housing that meets the needs of the reserve community. A significant number of our participants were initially driven off the reserve by lack of housing. Another reason youth were forced off-reserve was due to social factors. Youths often cited drug or alcohol abuse as a critical factor in contributing to the dissolution of familial or social ties. This in turn led to their displacement from the reserve into urban centres. A number of recommendations arose in relation to these phenomena. First, the youth advocated earlier intervention for youth in regards to drugs and alcohol. A number of youth stated that no one intervened early enough in his or her drug and alcohol addictions to have a meaningful impact before the negative effects of their addictions took hold, ie. homelessness. Second, the youth wanted ways to build positive social relations, two such ways being the construction of Youth outreach centres or Teen resource centres on reserve and/or more funding for youth athletics/extra-curriculars. What the youth want and need is a place they can go (with their non-Aboriginal friends) to be safe and still have fun and talk to a professional if they feel they need. They also stressed that positive goals and commitments are needed for Aboriginal youth as they are seemingly lacking. Sport and other extra-curriculars (ie. music and art) can provide that for many youth, but the funding is simply not there for many youth particularly in the critical age range of 12-17.

3. Another huge problem area, particularly for male youth, was support in transitioning from correction facilities back into their communities. We recommend that their be increased financial assistance particularly for youth moving from a transition house into regular housing. Having only social assistance to try and "restart" their lives proved impossible for these youth. Attempting to save enough for rent is one thing, but trying to have excess cash for a damage deposit, and other additional initial costs of moving out on ones own resulted in the youth having to pool their resources with other youth or adults transitioning back into society from prison. The youth explained how this situation increased the chance of recidivism and or going back to drugs and/or alcohol to deal with the stressful situation.

4. Something we noticed throughout the interviews was that participants who encountered service providers that went above and beyond where in a much better place, both mentally and materially. The participants expressed this as not simply a correlation but a causal factor in a number of interviews and therefore we recommend support for a new ethics for service providers to Aboriginal youths. While it is beyond the scope of this summary to discuss in full, a new ethical approach is currently in the works for social workers in New Brunswick who work in Aboriginal communities. Some of the changes being recommended allow for close or personal bonds (akin to familial in some cases) to be developed between service providers and youths. Throughout the research youth spoke about not only being disconnected from their community geographically but also

disconnected from their families and friends as a result of their experience of homelessness. Service providers for some of the youth interviewed represented the only positive adults in their lives. Service providers came to represent the youths family, friend, and service provider all at once, and this was a positive thing for the youths who experienced this.

5. Our final recommendation addresses the issue of promoting programs/services aimed at homeless youth to their target recipients. Most of the participants to the project cited a lack of programs or services available, despite the fact that we as researchers knew of the existence of many programs or services that could meet the needs of these participants. The lack of knowledge of programs/services is likely due to a number of factors but one factor may be the mobile nature of the homeless experience. As researchers we experienced this issue first hand. In one instance a service provider put Colin in contact with a homeless female youth living in Fredericton on a Monday, by Wednesday that youth had by all accounts gone to Miramichi to live with a friend who had just got out of prison. This sort of scenario happened a number of times throughout the course of the project, one moment the youth is there, the next moment they are gone. This mobility is made worse by the fact that these youth lack access to communication devices, like cell-phones, the Internet, etc. So when they move they are essentially cut-off, and this makes it very difficult to offer them the kinds of services they need, or to maintain a continuity of services. Furthermore, because homeless Aboriginal youths have been displaced they often times find themselves in unfamiliar places, and are thus not in a position to easily locate and engage services. We recommend research into new methods of reaching homeless Aboriginal youths, ones that take into account their mobility and history of displacement. We place the onus on the service providers and agencies to develop ways of engaging Aboriginal youths to access these much-needed services.

Aboriginal youth homelessness is predictable and preventable. In order to meaningfully address Aboriginal youth homelessness a serious commit must be made. The narratives and recommendations of the youth we interviewed and other recommendations found within this report are an excellent starting point for those who wish to institute meaningful change to help this amazing group of youths.

Appendix A

Participant Information Form

Project Title: Urban Aboriginal Youth Homelessness in New Brunswick

Age: _____

Education level: _____

Approximate monthly income and source: _____

Where you were born: _____

Where you currently reside: _____

Gender: _____

Sexuality: _____

Appendix B

Project Title: Urban Aboriginal Youth Homelessness in New Brunswick

Interviewer: Colin Hitchcock/Roy Stewart

New Brunswick Aboriginal Peoples Council   Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada

Interviewee:

Date:

As the Interviewee, I have been fully informed of the following points before proceeding with the interview/research circle.

1. The purpose of this project is to determine the supports, challenges, and barriers Aboriginal youth face in experiencing homelessness.
2. My participation in this research is completely voluntary and I understand the intent and purpose of this research.
3. Upon my request, I understand that my identity will be kept confidential and that I have the right to withdraw from this research at any time.
4. I know that I may refuse to answer any questions and that I may withdraw at a later date. Any information provided by me will be destroyed at any time upon my request.
5. Additional conditions for my participation in this research are noted here:
6. I will receive a copy of this contract.
7. Upon completion of this interview/research circle I will receive an honorarium in the amount of $250 for the purposes of my participation in the project as well as transportation to the interview/research circle.

Signatures:

                     Interviewee   Interviewer

Appendix C

Interview Guide

1. Opening Questions:
    a. Introduce interviewer.
    b. Age?
    c. Where were you born?
    d. Currently residing?
2. Personal History (Past)
    a. Can you tell us/me about your early home life?
        i. Who did you live with?
        ii. What was your home life like?
            1. How would you describe your early home life?
        iii. From your perspective what were the issues in your home growing up?
            1. Eg. Economics / finances, alcohol, abuse, abuse.
    b. What supports were available to you and your family during this time?
        i. Extended family? Friends?
        ii. Formal supports? School, social services, groups.
        iii. First Nations/Aboriginal community?
    c. What could have helped back then?
        i. What did you and your family need back then that wasn't available?
    d. Did you / your family have any interaction with any Aboriginal organizations when you were younger?
3. Between Then and Now
    a. When did you first feel like you experienced homelessness?
    b. How did the transition take place?
        i. What issues did you face specifically that lead to you experiencing homelessness?
            1. ie. Historical and cultural trauma, systemic/societal factors (addictions, poverty, violence (including domestic violence), environments and systems related to racism (i.e. policies such as the Indian Act), lack of relevant supports, and changes in supports and services.)
            2. Traumatic event? Loss of job? Death in family?
            3. Or was it a gradual process?
    c. How did/does the transition into homelessness affect you?
    d. How have you lived/survived after the transition?
4. Assistance
    a. What agencies have you utilized throughout your homeless experience?
        i. How did you find out about them?
        ii. How did you contact them?
        iii. What services did they provide you with?

        iv. How has that service moved you towards not being homeless?

        v. As an Aboriginal person how could the agency better serve you?

5. What could be done better?
   a. What are your suggestions for policy makers and/or workers of the agencies you have used?
   b. How might the needs of you as an Aboriginal person be better accommodated?
      i. physical, spiritual, etc?
   c. If you were a service provider what would be your main focus be?