

# **Indigenous Eviction Prevention: Decolonial Practice in Housing and Harm Reduction**



**Presented by:**

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# Indigenous Eviction Prevention Best Practice Considerations

*Presented by the Indigenous Outreach Workers (IOW) Network, Lekwungen Territories  
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## **Background:**

For many thousands of years in what is today known as British Columbia, First Nations enjoyed good health and wellness on their lands and territories, upheld by traditional cultural practices that maintained and supported wholistic healing and wellbeing. Processes of colonialism and racism systematically disrupted, and continue to disrupt, the health and wellness of First Nations. Systemic racism is woven into the foundation and practices of Canada's social system, including through the exclusion and dismissal of First Nations perspectives and practices related to housing (FNHA, April 2021).

According to Canada's Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills, and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (2021),

Access to safe, affordable housing is essential to the health and well-being of all Canadians. Moreover, adequate housing is a fundamental human right that was recently recognized by the federal government and Parliament in the National Housing Strategy Act. Housing is also referenced in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other United Nations human rights treaties and declarations to which Canada is a signatory. For example, Article 21 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that Indigenous peoples have the right to the improvement of their social and economic conditions including housing. The Minister of Justice recently introduced a bill in the House of Commons on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Despite these initiatives, many Indigenous peoples have lacked access to safe, affordable, and culturally appropriate housing for too long. As explained by one witness, Indigenous peoples in urban, rural, and remote areas are "experiencing gross and systemic violations of the right to housing.

Homelessness is related to history and must be situated within a colonial context. Federal government policies such as Canadian Indian Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and First Nations segregation on reserve, as well as the general consequences of colonization, impacted and continue to impact Indigenous peoples and communities. This history has displaced Indigenous peoples from the land and from our communities. Laws and teachings that belong to all nations up and down the coast of Vancouver Island are that everyone has a home and everyone has a meal to eat. Recognizing that these laws are not being respected, met or followed, is imperative that we work to understand how colonization has disrupted these basic rights and ancestral teachings that have been passed down for thousands of years. It is also important that we begin to understand how colonization has impacted the way that Indigenous people live, for instance today, we can see that intergenerational trauma and pain has led some people to heavily use substances and therefore end up being isolated and disconnected from their homes, communities, culture and family. The interruption in connection and relationship building for Indigenous people and their families creates feelings of isolation and separation which oppose the laws and values for many Indigenous communities.

Furthermore, and as argued by Thistle (2017), Indigenous homelessness goes beyond lack of maintaining a physical structure, it is also related to the disconnect from the ability to maintain relationships with family, community, one's territory and ancestral laws, identity and culture. With that said, it is important to call on housing service providers to work and counteract these continuous acts of

colonization. As the IOW, we have witnessed many evictions faced by our relatives from supportive housing sites. These evictions only work to further isolate, oppress and breakdown any form of connection and community that Indigenous folks have created. A decolonial approach to providing housing services is to provide ways to support folks in maintaining relationships to one another and their identity. As stated in the calls to action lead by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) with regards to Indigenous people and their health, they call upon Canada to recognize that the current state of health and well-being for many Indigenous people is a direct result of colonization and policies that have worked to exclude, oppress, and displace Indigenous peoples. These policies include: these being the *Indian Act*, The residential school system, the 60's Scoop, among others. The TRC calls on Canada to include Indigenous voice and experience when working towards closing the gap of health outcomes for Indigenous vs. Non-Indigenous folks in Canada (TRC, 2015). That being said, it is important to include the voice and experience of those living in supportive housing sites to understand what is best needed in order for these folks to be more than just healthy but to thrive and find connection to one another, community and their identity. To turn away from this call is to continue working from a colonial trajectory that will continue to oppress and displace some of the most vulnerable people in Canadian society today.

The Point in Time Count 2021 shows that 35% of folks who are experiencing being unhoused in Victoria BC are Indigenous. 55% of those people have experience living in the foster care system and 62% of those folks have a personal and close history to family members, or themselves, attending residential school systems (Fiorentino et.al., p5). As mentioned, colonization has impacted Indigenous people in many negative ways. Many of the Indigenous people living at supportive housing sites all throughout Greater Victoria face similar colonial histories and relationship with the residential school system and sixties scoop all leading to carrying intergenerational trauma. The Point in Time Count conducted in Victoria BC by the CRD highlights that nearly 45% of the Indigenous people living unhoused have had one grandparent attend residential schools and over half of the population of unhoused folks have spent time in the foster care system (Fiorentino et.al, 2021).

Due to the trauma, neglect and anger that many Indigenous people faced while growing up in a family impacted from having been forced to engage in colonial systems such as residential schools, common symptoms that stem from these violent acts of colonization are: anger, violence and outrage. Piche (2015) argues that colonization has brought about types of toxic and racialized definitions of masculinity while illustrating how Indigenous men had been stripped of their power and autonomy due to the marginalization that Indigenous communities face today. Long ago, men shared decision making powers with other folks of all genders in their communities, they along with everyone in their communities, had this agency removed. Toxic masculinity then can be seen as one way that Indigenous men respond to a sense of powerlessness in a patriarchal and unjust society. Furthermore, today, we notice that Indigenous men are facing eviction at extreme rates. For instance, the Indigenous Outreach Workers Network (IOW) witnessed five Indigenous men that they work with, from the months of October 2021- November 2021, be evicted from their homes. Therefore, this policy recommendation written by the IOW hopes to draw light to the issues that Indigenous people are facing while using substances, combating the ongoing realities of colonization, all while trying to maintain housing, relationship and responsibility to one another, within colonial contexts.

Furthermore, prior to contact Indigenous women on the coast played vital roles in the governance and socio-political society of their nations (Jones, 2021). As noted, the *Indian Act* was legislation that worked to oppress, displace and even erase Indigenous peoples within Canada and for Indigenous women this legislation impacted them negatively in numerous ways. For instance, Indigenous women faced racialized and gendered policies that restricted them from maintaining connection to home and family and maintaining territory if they were to marry a non-status man. This is only one example of how the *Indian Act* worked to define and enhance patriarchal social structures within Indigenous communities therefore breaking down systems of governance where these women held positions of authority.

This form of gendered hierarchy that was introduced to Indigenous communities normalized violence unto Indigenous women within their own communities and also worked to dehumanize Indigenous women within Canadian society. Today, Indigenous women still bear the brunt of this disproportionate burden related to: disease, poverty, violence and incarceration (Bingham et al., 2019). For instance, the violence that Indigenous women in Canada face has recently been deemed a national human rights issue and this is connected to the high numbers of murdered and missing Indigenous women and children within this nation. Indigenous women face violent victimization at more than double the rate of non-Indigenous women and are three times more likely to face sexualized assault than non-Indigenous women in Canada. These women are also six times more likely to exhibit symptoms of PTSD and suicidality (ibid). With these statistics in mind, we can see that violence shapes much of the reality and context that Indigenous women face daily in a colonized world. This violent reality also extends into the lives of Indigenous women who seek to secure housing and may use substances. Due to this dark reality that Indigenous women face, it becomes important for housing service providers to find ways to offer up culturally safe supports and ways to support Indigenous women from facing evictions, throwing them back to the violent realities that the colonial world has to offer.

As briefly illustrated, the attempt to erase Indigenous women and their roles that were grounded in respect and authority, we have highlighted the need to recognize the distinct experiences of Indigenous women who are living in supportive housing sites within Lekwungen territories. If sites were to find ways to offer supports offered in a decolonial practice and culturally safe way, they would be working towards empowering and uplifting a vulnerable population of people who are living unhoused and using substances. Not only should Indigenous women be supported in this manner, it is also important to recognize the impacts of colonization on trans, two-spirit and non-binary Indigenous folks too.

Likewise, LGBTQS2 folks and especially youth, are overrepresented as people who are currently face being unhoused. Hunt (2015) highlights the way that colonial violence has worked to erase and silence two-spirit people due to the established colonial racialized hierarchies that were founded on gendered binaries. These binaries focus on western norms include reinforced roles for both men and women, but never included roles for LGBTQS2 folks within their socio-political societies. Many pre-colonial Indigenous societies where two-spirit folk were valued and held prominent positions within their nations. This erasure of identity has led to the violent reality that LGBTQS2 folks face today. Many Indigenous LGBTQS2+ folks face racism and stigma within mainstream societies and also tend to face stigma, homophobia and transphobic realities have been left behind due to colonial legacies within Indigenous communities and on reservations. Brunanski et al (2017) argue that due to the colonial reality that Indigenous LGBTQS2 youth face daily they are more likely to encounter: stigma related to their sexual identities and were at a much higher risk to face violence and being unhoused. LGBTQS2 Indigenous youth have reported that within shelters the main issues that they faced were apathy from staff and homophobia from other residents in buildings that they were in (ibid). The streets offer a similar reality where LGBTQS2 is not widely discussed understood or upheld. Often, LGBTQS2 folks face violence at extreme rates.

Consequently, it becomes important for housing services providers, outreach workers and support workers to all familiarize themselves with the history of colonization. This brief document was written to service providers to begin to better understand the impacts that Indigenous people, of all genders, face due to our violent history is to begin centering support work for vulnerable folks in a decolonial lens. To understand how anger, outrage and violence impact Indigenous people and connect that pain to substance use and the inability to maintain market housing will only bring about positive change for Indigenous folks depending on supportive housing to maintain safety and once again, begin to build community, a sense of identity and connection to bring about positive change for Indigenous folks. For housing service providers to turn away from being called on to begin to create this decolonial form of support is to continue to control Indigenous peoples lives and bodies. As stated, colonization brought with

it violent control over Indigenous people's nations/governance, relationships, and territories. Patriarchal forms of governmental control led to the removal of Indigenous authority, agency and power. Within supportive housing sites today, we can see how this power and authority that operates within housing policies still works to control and displace Indigenous folks living within those structures. Take for instance non-compliance with having visitors over. Visiting and the maintenance of relationships are a fundamental piece to human life. More so, this relationship building is a key component to many Indigenous aspects of governance and laws. Relationship building is inherent in Indigenous peoples lives, we have been taught that maintaining relationships with family, friends, kin, and the earth are what will keep us strong. In opposition to that, supportive housing sites in Greater Victoria have a no-guest policy, and when folks push back against that they are often reprimanded in the form of a 24-hour suspension. Paternalistic in nature, this form of control over people's lives has also led to evictions. For Indigenous peoples, evictions mean that they must once again be prepared to fight against the harms they face as Indigenous people on the streets. In a country that is fueled by racism and requires the displacement of Indigenous folks to maintain the order of the state, Indigenous people face much higher rates of violence and even death.

### **Indigenous Homelessness Context & Rational:**

As stated, Indigenous peoples are experiencing high levels of eviction, and especially Indigenous men. Many of the Indigenous men who faced evictions within Greater Victoria have been removed from their homes for acting belligerent, angry or violent. Herbert Dick of the Ahousaht Nation and Indigenous Outreach Worker stated that, "most of the Indigenous men who have been evicted take on roles in their housing sites as foundational pieces to support their friends and relatives while they live in these buildings. Often these guys have 364 good days, and it is one bad day that can force them back to the streets," (IOW Meeting, 2021). As stated, colonization has brought with its trauma that has rippled through Indigenous communities. Often, anger is one of the emotions that resides heavily in many homes, hearts and families within Indigenous communities. Due to colonization, Indigenous folks are taught from a young age that to default to anger hides their vulnerability and especially for folks who are unhoused or precariously housed, vulnerability does not support survival on the streets. Understanding the relationships between colonization, vulnerability, and anger we can understand how outbursts of anger or violence are a real response for Indigenous people who are forced to survive in systems or instances of injustice that they may face on the daily.

The housing challenges experienced by many Indigenous peoples are rooted in several factors, including historical policies, population growth and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2019 Canadian Housing Strategy states that, "the right to adequate housing is a fundamental human right affirmed in international law...housing is essential to inherent dignity and well-being of the person and in building sustainable and inclusive communities," (Government of Canada, 2019, p2). We can also see the covert racism that stems from the socialization of Canadians against Indigenous people in Canada can also impact the way that Indigenous folks who are precariously housed in maintaining their housing rights. In order to combat perpetuating racism that is existent in controlling Indigenous people and their responses/lived experiences to colonization and trauma we should see that housing service providers, support staff/outreach workers, and management need to begin to work from a decolonial narrative that works to understand reactions and lived experiences of the Indigenous folks that they are supporting. This means working to understand the impacts and connections of substance use, disconnection from community, anger and violence, loneliness and sadness, and ultimately colonial forces that work insidiously to carry on this control over Indigenous people.

Len Pierre of the Katzie First Nation has created two maps for folks to understand Indigenous ways of being and how these pieces to Indigenous life have been impacted by colonization. Pierre developed The Blue Map which is founded on the teachings related to connection/relationship. For Indigenous people to be connected, Pierre argues that this brings forward: healing, love, joy, identity, power,

attachment, inclusion, purpose, and stability. All of these positive pieces to Indigenous community stem from building strength in community by maintaining connection to: family/kin, culture/tradition and from our territories (Pierre, 2021). However, due to colonization and violence inflicted from residential schools, the theft of land/dispossession and the 60's scoop Indigenous peoples have lost the foundation of the Blue Map and connection and face these negative issues such as: fear, shame, isolation, detachment, loss of identity, loss of rights, poverty, lack of housing and lack of freedom (Pierre, 2021).

### **ey stelnexw Values**

The Indigenous Outreach Workers (IOW) Network or *ey stelnexw* (translates from English to Lekwungen as good medicine), formed in 2020 to find ways to best support our relatives and friends who are living unhoused, precariously housed or who may be using substances. We meet bi-weekly to support one another in this work, to collaborate on events and to ensure we are offering the best wrap around services that we can. We are all outreach and support workers and we come from 8 different non-profit organizations. Over the past two year we have offered cultural events, dinners, BBQ's, collaborated on outreach, worked to build trust and relationships with those we work with/support, and also supported at least 30 people in transitioning from living outside into supportive housing. As a network we have maintained relationships with these folks to bridge the gaps as they transition from outdoors to indoors.

Our work is rooted in the teachings of our ancestors. Every day, we work to hold one another up and those that we support. Most of the IOW comes from nations from Vancouver Island and we are proud to be Coast Salish, Nuuchah-nulth or Kwakwaka'wakw. There are others in the IOW who are from nations farther east and they too bring their teachings, gifts and medicine to share with folks as well. We also all have our own experiences with colonization and some of us with substance use. We also recognize the power embedded in our cultures, laws, ancestral teachings and we work hard to bring back culture to those who are wanting to reconnect in ways that feel good for them. Finally, we as a network also know that as Indigenous people that we value and rely on relationships with one another to keep strong. These are all ways that we can work to heal ourselves and support one another as we journey through colonization as Indigenous people.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Best Practices and Recommended Changes to Current Housing Policy and Eviction Practices:**

The IOW calls on housing service providers and their staff to take up training to include best decolonial practices while supporting Indigenous folks living in their supportive housing sites. Training offered to service providers to help them make connections between intergenerational trauma, anger, substance use, isolation etc will create healthier home and spaces for Indigenous people they support. Without making these connections and without implementing decolonial practice, the standards and expectations of living for Indigenous people will continue to be met with eviction and discharges, forcing them back to violence and vulnerable positions on the streets. The IOW can provide recommendations for service providers to contact Indigenous consultants and presenters to talk about the impacts of colonization to help those in these training sessions make connections to best learn how to work from a trauma informed practice and in a way that creates Indigenous cultural safety in their agencies or housing sites.

The IOW calls for on-going Indigenous specific anti-racism education that occurs in the workplace for all folks supporting Indigenous people in supportive housing. An imperative piece to moving forward in this work is for non-Indigenous folks to look into themselves to better understand what negative stereotypes/tropes they carry against Indigenous folks. These stereotypes are often received due to the socialization of the state. The state has created many negative ideas of what Indigenous people and their communities have come to represent, hence the need to assimilate, erase, silence, and displace Indigenous people. It is important that agencies themselves look to the way that staff work with

Indigenous people to break these racist ideologies that have been embedded into many citizens of Canada.

The IOW also calls upon housing service providers and supporting housing sites to find ways to begin building relationships with local Indigenous nations and the urban Indigenous population. By doing so, these sites would better understand how to support Indigenous people by learning and engaging what it means to uphold local Indigenous laws of this island and island nations. To learn more about the laws, protocols and culture of island nations housing sites would better support Indigenous folks and work from a place of cultural safety. Building relationships would also allow for supportive housing sites to include more cultural supports by way of inviting drum groups, medicine workers, crafters, cooks etc. to their sites to offer their Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks alike, the chance to connect or re-connect to Indigenous ways of being. If sites are asking Indigenous people to come to their site to offer these workshops/events it is also important for them to have honoraria and a gift to thank those people for sharing their teachings and gifts with the community. The IOW also calls upon local agencies and sites to hire at least one full-time Indigenous liaison to help guide the work of decolonization at each housing site and also for Indigenous folks living at the sites to have a familiar face to call upon and build relationship with. This would also be a way to improve Indigenous folks experiences at housing sites and be one built-in way to prevent Indigenous folks from facing eviction from their homes.

Furthermore, the Indigenous Outreach Workers Network, are available for Indigenous people at all the housing sites in Greater Victoria. As we do our work to support our relatives and friends, we lean on each of our gifts, skills and own lived experience with colonization while supporting folks who are unhoused or precariously housed. We understand that building safety and trust with the folks that we work with is key to relationship building and supporting folks. Due to intergenerational trauma trust can be very limited for Indigenous folks who have endured lifetimes of hurt, pain, and distrust. The IOW has taken it's time to build trust among the relatives that we work with. As we chatted amongst ourselves as the IOW, we began to recognize that we have experienced little anger or outbursts and connect that to the fact that we have worked hard to understand, support, and mostly build trust amongst those we work with.

The IOW calls upon agencies and housing service sites to offer positions for peer workers that are Indigenous to work towards decolonizing housing sites or services that they may require from agencies. To listen to, uphold, and value the experiences of those that have or are currently living unhoused or using substances is imperative to a shift happening in this work. We know that folks with lived experience have so much knowledge, wisdom and teachings to offer. It is time we work towards valuing these voices and experiences at *all* sites/agencies in Greater Victoria, not just by peer-based organizations.

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The IOW also recognize that once Indigenous people move inside, they need to have support built into that transition period that focuses on building trust and relationship with the service providers/staff they are to be living with. A fundamental piece of this document has taken time to explain the importance of relationship building and connection for Indigenous people and connected that to the ancestral laws and foundations for Indigenous nations and people. The IOW can work to offer that bridging to support connection for Indigenous folks we work with who are moving inside and for those we do not know, we can work to build relationships with them, and we call on staff at supportive housing sites to work alongside us, building relationships with not only the IOW but Indigenous folks living in their sites.

Finally, the IOW wants to offer up that moving forward our team will be on-call for de-escalation supports. If an Indigenous person is having an issue, we as the IOW will have a call-out chart and will come to the housing site in pairs, no matter the day and time, to offer our supports for someone who may be experiencing disruptive behavior. Rather than face eviction, we hope that our presence and skills which are premised on relationship and trust, will help to de-escalate the situation. When the time is right, our team can re-connect with residents at sites to see what kinds of supports we can offer in order to work together at building safe and promising futures for them at their supportive housing site.



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## Resources

National Indigenous Cultural Safety Webinars Videos: <https://www.icscollaborative.com/webinars>

Webinar #15: Two Spirit and Indigiqueer cultural safety: Considerations for relational practice and policy, Presented by: Dr. James Makokis and Dr. Karina Walters

Webinar #12: Spirit Bear's Guide to Reconciliation, Presented by: Dr. Cindy Blackstock

Webinar #10: Racism Hurts: Exploring the Health Impacts of Anti-Indigenous Racism, Presented by: Professor Yin Paradies and Cheryl Currie

Webinar #7: Indigenous Health Equity: Examining Racism as an Indigenous Social Determinant of Health, Presented by: Dr. Marcia Anderson and Dr. Elizabeth McGibbon

Webinar #6: Critical Race Theory and its Implication for Indigenous Cultural Safety, Presented by: Dr. Verna St. Denis

Webinar #4: Racism, Reconciliation, and Indigenous Cultural Safety, Presented by: Shelagh Rogers interview with Senator Murray Sinclair

Webinar #2: Racism and Privilege in the Everyday, Presented by: Dr. Charlotte Loppie and Dr. Adam Barker