



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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## Displacement, Housing and Homelessness in Northern Manitoba Communities

**P**overty, overcrowded housing, high rates of homelessness, systemic racism are just some of the underlying conditions causing communities in the northern region of Manitoba to be vulnerable to COVID19. For these reasons and more, Indigenous leaders in communities in the northern region acted quickly to declare a state of emergency and isolate their communities. In Thompson three Point in Time Counts have substantiated Indigenous people are extremely overrepresented (94.5 percentage) in the local homeless population. Thompson and the outlying communities are have been overwhelmed by inadequate housing for many years. Today the City continues to struggle to support social distancing for the high numbers of the homeless in the community. COVID 19 also comes in the wake of a disaster in Thompson created by the unsafe living conditions and a fire in two large apartment blocks in the city. Many who were rendered homeless by this crisis have still not recovered their housing.

The fact that Indigenous people are consistently overrepresented in homeless counts across Canada reflects the lack of attention to its causes, such as the historical effects of colonization. Importantly, according to Thistle, homelessness for Indigenous people is not just about the absence of a roof over peoples heads, it is an experience of being "...isolated from their relationships to the land, water,

place, family , kin, each other, animals, cultures, language and identities". This isolation has been worsened by years of neglect and slap and dash responses from governments.

Our new CCPA Manitoba report, Displacement, Housing and Homelessness in Northern Manitoba Communities was developed in two communities, Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN) and Thompson. The study explored factors facilitating homelessness and restraining the movement out of homelessness in the north. Impacts of colonization including limitations of services, racism, and domestic violence were some of the reasons that participants gave as causes of homelessness. Housing shortages, overcrowded housing and being subjected to unacceptable living conditions, however, were the key factors participants identified as contributing to mobility out of communities and into homelessness in Thompson.

The City of Thompson, like so many communities in Canada's "resource north", developed with no consideration of the peoples who had lived there for thousands of years. Though the City once opposed the residency and full economic participation of its established neighbors in the region, it has since come to act as a service hub for the many surrounding First Nations communities and over 40% of the population in Thompson identify as Indigenous. Efforts in more recent years

there is an alternative.

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toward shared municipal and Indigenous planning have fallen short, however, Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation now has designated reserve land in Thompson and maintains significant investments in the community and region. These investments are part of the First Nation's larger vision, with culture as their foundation, for a self-sufficient and sustainable future. The City of Thompson continues to maintain the Aboriginal Accord and has in recent years supported increasing culturally appropriate options for housing in the city. It has also been willing to innovate to develop more affordable housing options, though these efforts have met with opposition and/or lack of investment from the provincial and federal governments.

The Manitoba government has been slow to respond to the needs of vulnerable citizens during COVID. Some suspect the government is using the crisis as an opportunity to implement its agenda for austerity and other measures. Though there were billions of federal dollars transferred to the provinces toward recognizing housing as a human right, there is little indication these monies have benefited the northern region in Manitoba. In fact, northerners were impacted by claw backs on rental benefits implemented by the province late last year. The province has also sold off many subsidized housing properties in recent years. There is some evidence, however, that the pandemic motivated the province to provide some additional housing for the homeless, at least in the Southern part of the province. The province has also recently announced funding for a sobering centre in Thompson.

Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation remembers a time when the community thrived and people were able to take care of each other. Though housing and other social issues are an ongoing challenge, Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation is leveraging their partnerships and investments in the region and taking a positive growth outlook working toward being a fully self-governing First Nation. The community has established a housing

authority in recent years, and going forward the community has a holistic vision for its future that includes fairness and housing for all. So, given the ongoing demand for natural resources, the breadth of investment in hydropower in the region together with recent transfers from the federal government toward housing as a human right, could Manitoba's economic outlook and planning for protection from future pandemics not also be holistic and include a response to the housing crisis in the north? According to this new study, this will require developing a regional plan formed from meaningful reciprocal relationships with Indigenous people in order to ensure everyone benefits from future work and investments in social programs and housing in the north.

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References available upon request.