



Moving from gaps to goals: Defining community-based housing metrics in Nishnawbe Aski Nation

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In 2018 Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) Chiefs-in-Assembly reaffirmed their 2014 Declaration of a Collective Housing Emergency. In response to the ongoing failure to address the immediate and long-term housing needs of NAN members, Chiefs-in-Assembly mandated the creation of a “modern NAN Housing Strategy, focused on supporting community-defined need and NAN communities’ self-determination of their housing systems”.¹

The focus of the NAN Housing Strategy (the Strategy) on community-defined needs, represents a significant shift away from universal understandings of housing needs, which have dominated Canadian Indigenous public policy responses. The Government of Canada, and related agencies, policies, programs and initiatives in on-reserve housing, have long been centred on reducing outcome disparities in a single universally-measured housing metric. In 1981 Core Housing Need^{2,3} was developed to be a comprehensive metric representing the minimum standard of housing that a household requires, without paying “an excessive proportion of their income”.⁴ Since this time, housing programs have focused on First Nations deficit and looked to bring a Canadian standard of housing on-reserve⁵.

While housing programs have historically had explicitly assimilationist goals, aiming to rid housing systems of “vice”⁶, or to prepare people living on reserve for a transition to urban life,⁷ current programs instead speak of closing or eliminating discrepancies.⁸ Programs now recognize the distinct needs of First Nations⁹ and their right to greater autonomy in housing systems.^{10,11} However, the objectives of housing programs remain tied to Core Housing Need. As a result, responsibility is often given to First Nations to design a plan and implement a program that will achieve an objective they had no control in setting.

The problem with Core Housing Need is not technical, but is instead a question of relevance. The Core Housing Need metric demonstrated a changing expectation of housing in urban Canada, no longer measuring access to indoor plumbing, electricity and other features now considered standard. As a nationally-collected metric, and through its co-development with the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, it was designed to provide simple cross-community comparisons. These comparisons led to its operational supremacy in Canadian public policy through the identification of outlier populations and resulting implementation of targeted interventions. However, a result of its universal application, Core Housing Need does not represent any contextual factors or local understandings of home.

In their Declaration of Housing Emergency, NAN Chiefs-in-Assembly describe the existing housing system as failing to create or promote wellness in communities. This analysis of housing exists outside of the limited, though universal, definition of Core Housing Need, and suggests that even if the gap in Core Housing Need were to be reduced, the housing emergency will likely remain. While a wider set of metrics, measuring the relationship between housing and well-being, developed at the community or regional level, may not allow for national-

level cross comparison, it would offer a better reflection of community-defined needs. The challenge becomes operationalizing a variety of locally-appropriate metrics within a national framework; however, this is the challenge which comes with implementing the right¹² of First Nations to self-determination in their housing systems.

Nishnawbe Aski Nation Housing Strategy

The NAN Housing Strategy is a three-year project creating occupant-focused housing need assessments, determining localized housing need, and developing housing solutions at the community and regional level. The NAN Housing Strategy will centre First Nations knowledge and lived experience to support the creation of local institutions responsible for the planning, governance and design of their housing systems.

NAN represents 49 First Nations within northern Ontario with the total population of membership (on and off reserve) estimated around 45,000 people. NAN encompasses James Bay Treaty No. 9 and Ontario's portion of Treaty No. 5, and has a total land-mass covering two-thirds of the province of Ontario spanning 210,000 square miles. The people traditionally speak four languages: OjiCree in the west, Ojibway in the central-south area, and Cree and Algonquin in the east.

NAN continues to work to improve the quality of life for the NAN territory. Through existing partnerships and agreements with Treaty partners (governments of Canada and Ontario), NAN continues to advocate on behalf of the communities it represents for self-determination with functioning self-government.

Continuing their ongoing partnership with NAN, and providing technical, training and community engagement support on this project, is Together Design Lab at Ryerson University. A team of students, staff and faculty with training in planning and architecture, Together Design Lab has extensive experience partnering with First Nations to create change in housing systems within northern Ontario.

The measurement of "community-defined need" requires the creation of an entirely new framework of housing evaluation. Before beginning the co-creation process, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Housing Strategy team (NANHS team) outlined guidelines for metric creation. The primary objective of guidelines was to encourage a focus on specificity, without imposing disciplinary or technical understandings of home.

These guidelines were:

- Housing should be measured at the individual level, where possible;
- housing is more than a physical structure, so it should be evaluated on more than its physical components;
- housing metrics should reflect local understandings and priorities in housing; and
- different people may have different housing priorities, and where possible, all should be accounted for.

Over 250 community members have already participated in the initial phase of community co-creation. As a result of the initial phase, the NANHS team has identified metrics within three domains: physical characteristics, occupant satisfaction and lived experience. Physical characteristics often rely on technical standards measuring the safety, quality and durability of homes. Occupant satisfaction measures the ability of home to meet the needs of each occupant, including whether spaces are appropriately designed to satisfy

the lifestyle requirements of individuals. Lived experience measures the social, emotional and spiritual outcomes of occupants as a result of housing systems. Within each domain, a number of themes and sub-themes have emerged which represent community understandings of home.

Importantly, themes have emerged which represent needs of specific demographic groups within communities. Youth have been described as a group experiencing especially high levels of need under the current housing system; but also, as a group with unique housing priorities. As a result, the evaluation of housing for youth

should be measured using a combination of the general housing measures created and a series of specific metrics representing the needs and priorities of youth. Similar sets of specific metrics have also been identified for Elders and single adults, two other groups described as currently experiencing higher levels of needs.

Through community engagement, the objective is to create a comprehensive list of possible housing metrics reflective of the climate, geography and culture of NAN territory. While it is expected that metrics will emerge from sessions as common or shared, which will form a regional housing needs framework, others will be distinct to particular groups or communities allowing for each of the 49 NAN First Nations to adopt their own set. It is apparent that housing priorities may change as a response to changing context and having a comprehensive list of metrics allows community evaluation of housing to be iterative and responsive. By removing the requirement of standardization and the objective of national or international data comparison, data can become locally embedded.

The Core Housing Need metric is inappropriate in the context of First Nations housing policy, as it does not address the distinct objectives and priorities of housing at the First Nation community level. However, the creation of community-based metrics, alone, is insufficient to effectively promote change in the housing system of NAN First Nations. As noted above, the effectiveness of housing evaluations is directly linked to its operationalization in public policy. In order to effect transformative change, holistic understandings of “home” need to be the foundation of housing policy, and First Nations communities need to be fully engaged in the development of relevant metrics.

Endnotes

- ¹ Chiefs-in-Assembly Resolution 18/18 (June 5, 2018)
- ² Auditor General of Canada. (2018). Report 5 – Socio-economic gaps on First Nations Reserves- Indigenous Services Canada. 2018 Spring Reports of the Auditor General of Canada. Retrieved from http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_oag_201805_05_e_43037.html;
- ³ Paul Burke, Connie Casey and Gerd Doepner, Housing Affordability Problems and Housing Need in Canada and the United States: A comparative study. Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.
- ⁴ Paul Burke, Connie Casey and Gerd Doepner, Housing Affordability Problems and Housing Need in Canada and the United States: A comparative study. Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.
- ⁵ J. B. Cullingworth, Canadian Housing Policy Research: Some initial impressions, Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, 1980.
- ⁶ Adele Perry, “From ‘the hot bed of vice’ to the ‘good and well-ordered Christian home’: First Nations housing reform in nineteenth-century British Columbia”, *Ethnohistory* 50, no. 4 (2003): 587-610.
- ⁷ National Indian Brotherhood, Declaration on Indian Housing: Policy paper. Ottawa: The Brotherhood, 1974.
- ⁸ Canada. Employment and Social Development Canada. Canada’s National Housing Strategy: A Place to Call Home. Gatineau, Qc: Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Canada. Employment and Social Development Canada. The National Housing Strategy Glossary of Common Terms, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://eppdscrmssa01.blob.core.windows.net/cmhcprodcontainer/files/pdf/glossary/nhs-glossary-en.pdf?sv=2018-03-28&ss=b&srt=sco&sp=r&se=2021-05-07T03:55:04Z&st=2019-05-06T19:55:04Z&spr=https,http&sig=bFocHM6noljK8rlhy11dy%2BkQJU BX%2BCDKzkjLfhUIU0%3D>
- ¹¹ Canada. Indigenous Services Canada. 1996 On-Reserve Housing Policy. Retrieved from: <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100010752/1535115367287>
- ¹² UN General Assembly, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: resolution/adopted by the General Assembly, 2 October 2007, A/RES/61/1295, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/471355a82.html>