

The Housing Conditions of Aboriginal People in Canada

Introduction

Many case studies have documented poor, unsafe, and crowded housing conditions in Canadian Aboriginal communities. These studies have used a variety of approaches, making it difficult to compare results or to obtain a national perspective.

This issue of *Research & Development Highlights* presents the findings of a comprehensive national study of Aboriginal housing conditions in Canada. The study combined data from the 1991 Census and the post-censal Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS), and used CMHC's core housing need model. It describes Aboriginal housing conditions across the country and compares them to non-Aboriginal conditions.

Core Housing Need Model

The core housing need model is used by Canada's federal government, provincial housing agencies, and other key players in the housing field — such as municipalities and non-profit housing groups — to monitor housing conditions and to assist in the design, delivery, and evaluation of social housing initiatives. Housing conditions are assessed to identify households living below standards for adequacy, suitability, or affordability:

- To be **adequate**, a dwelling must have full bathroom facilities and, according to its residents, require no major repairs.
- To be **suitable**, a dwelling must have enough bedrooms for the size and make-up of the occupying household, as defined by the National Occupancy Standard.
- To be **affordable**, total shelter and utility costs must consume less than 30 percent of household income.

Households whose housing does not meet one or more standards and whose income is insufficient to afford rental housing that does meet standards are considered to be in core housing need. While the core housing need model has general applicability and is based on uniform standards, it cannot be fully applied on reserves where most housing is band-owned and shelter costs are handled differently. It is, however, still possible to identify households on reserves whose accommodations do not meet accepted standards.

The Aboriginal Peoples Survey Data Base

The APS was administered to a sample of households in which at least one person had indicated Aboriginal ethnicity or status in the 1991 Census. Data from the APS

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Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre *Les conditions de logement des peuples autochtones au Canada.*

**More Than
Half of
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were linked to data from the Census, resulting in a rich data base which expands the information available from the Census alone. While the Census and the APS experienced some problems with incomplete enumeration of the Aboriginal population, the data that they provide are more than adequate to broadly describe Aboriginal housing needs and compare them with those of the general Canadian population.

Findings

Housing Conditions On- and Off-Reserve

More than half (52 percent) of Aboriginal households reside in dwellings that fall below one or more of the housing standards. This compares to 32 percent of non-Aboriginal households. However, housing conditions are very different between Aboriginal households living on-reserve and those living off-reserve (Table 1).

**Table 1
Aboriginal Households Living Below Housing Need Standards and in Core Housing Need in 1991**

	Below Standards		In Core Need	
	Count	%	Count	%
Aboriginal Households	123,360	52%	Not Applicable	
On-Reserve	26,250	65%	Not Applicable	
Off-Reserve	97,100	49%	63,070	32%

On-reserve, nearly two-thirds of households (65 percent) live in housing that falls below at least one housing standard: 50 percent live in housing below the adequacy standard; 31 percent live in housing that does not meet the suitability standard; and 14 percent (of those which could be assessed) pay more than the amount prescribed by the affordability standard (Table 2). Many on-reserve households lack basic amenities, and one-quarter (25 percent) do not have adequate, functioning bathroom facilities.

**Table 2:
Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Households Living in Housing Below Standards, by On/Off Reserve Location, Canada, 1991**

Population & Location	Percentage Below Standards			
	Adequacy	Suitability	Affordability	One or More
Aboriginal Households				
On Reserve	50%	31%	14% *	65%
Off-Reserve	18%	17%	26%	49%
Non-Aboriginal Households				
Off-Reserve	9%	6%	22%	32%

* Applies only to the 41 percent of on-reserve households who rent or own their housing.

Core Housing Need Off-Reserve

The overall level of core housing need is similar for Aboriginal households living in urban areas and in rural areas, with about 32 percent of each group in core need. However, urban and rural households encounter different types of housing need. Urban Aboriginal households in core need are twice as likely as their rural counterparts to experience housing affordability problems but are less likely to experience adequacy or suitability problems (Table 3).

**Table 3:
Off-Reserve Households in Core Need, by Core Need Standard and Urban/Rural Location, Canada 1991**

Population & Location	Percentage Below Standards			
	Adequacy	Suitability	Affordability	One or More
All Aboriginal Off-Reserve Households	9%	9%	25%	32%
Urban	8%	7%	29%	33%
Rural	16%	12%	14%	31%

Aboriginal Housing Needs Much Greater Than Other Canadian Households

In both urban and rural areas, Aboriginal households are more likely to be in core housing need than non-Aboriginal households. In urban areas, Aboriginal households are almost twice as likely as non-Aboriginal households to be in core need and live in housing below the affordability standard. In rural areas, they are several times more likely to be in core need and to live in housing that falls below the adequacy and suitability standards. In both urban and rural areas, Aboriginal households are more likely than non-Aboriginal households to experience more than one type of housing need.

Geographic Variations

Housing conditions vary considerably in different parts of Canada. On reserves, the proportions of households living in dwellings that fall below one or more housing standards are highest in Manitoba (74 percent), Ontario (71 percent), and Saskatchewan (70 percent) (Figure 1).

Off-reserve, the incidence of core housing need depends on geographic location: 31 percent of households in the south are in need, 34 percent in the mid-north, and 45 percent in the far-north where there is a high incidence of core need among the Inuit.

Among the off-reserve Aboriginal population, Saskatchewan (46 percent), Yukon (44 percent), and the Northwest Territories (47 percent) have the highest proportions of households in core need, while Quebec (21 percent), Ontario (26 percent), and the Maritimes (28 percent) have the lowest proportions (Figure 2). Urban levels of core need are particularly high in Saskatoon (49 percent), Regina (45 percent), Vancouver (44 percent), and Winnipeg (41 percent). In rural areas, levels of Aboriginal core need are highest in Saskatchewan (54 percent), the Northwest Territories (47 percent), and Alberta (36 percent).

Figure 1:
Regional Distribution of the Incidence of On-Reserve Housing Below At Least One Housing Standard

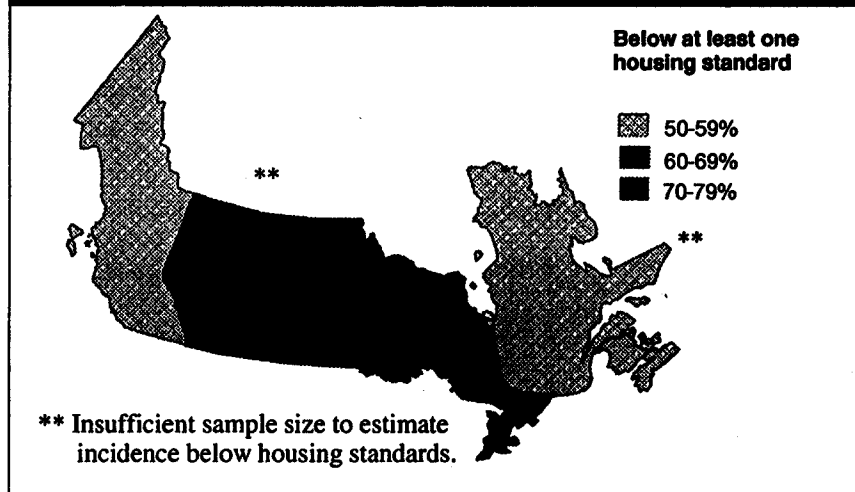
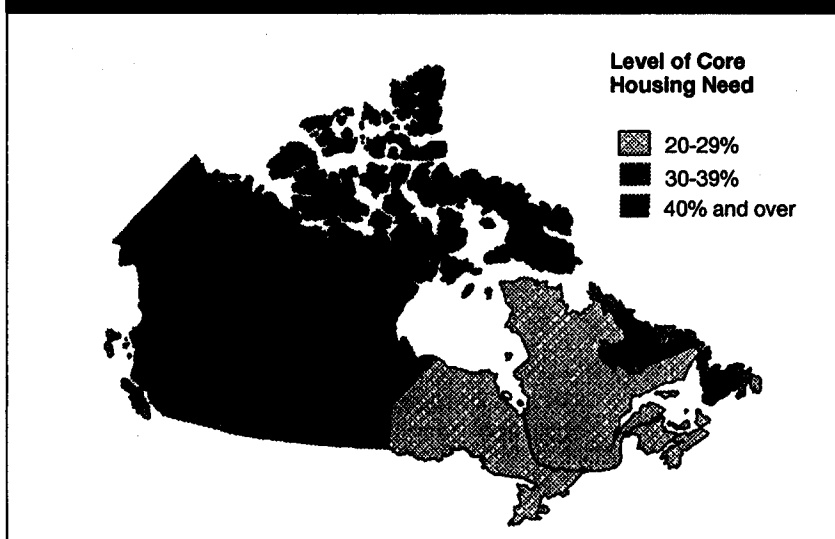


Figure 2:
Regional Distribution of Core Housing Need Among Aboriginal Households



Factors Affecting Conditions

The high incidence of poor housing conditions in Aboriginal communities is strongly related to a number of geographic, socio-demographic, economic, and health factors. Aboriginal households are often large and include many children and young adults, which leads to suitability (crowding) problems and, through wear and tear, adequacy problems. Aboriginal adults are twice as likely as non-Aboriginal adults to be moderately or severely disabled, which affects both their housing needs and their incomes. As a result, their housing often falls below both adequacy and affordability standards. And although Aboriginal households tend to be larger than non-Aboriginal households, their incomes are about 25 percent smaller, which contributes to greater affordability problems.

Other factors that affect the needs of Aboriginal households include the small size of homes on reserves, and the high cost of transporting housing materials to rural and remote areas. In addition, reserve housing often deteriorates rapidly due to extreme climates, poor construction, and the lack of money and skills for ongoing dwelling maintenance. In urban areas, many Aboriginal people, especially female single parents and people who are disabled, often rely on rental housing and fall into core housing need.

Conclusion

Housing needs are much greater among Aboriginal households than among other households in Canada and they vary considerably according to location. On reserves, Aboriginal people most often live in houses that are inadequate in condition or unsuitable in size, while in urban areas — and to a lesser extent, rural off-reserve areas — they most often encounter affordability problems. Aboriginal housing needs are greatest for residents of Saskatchewan, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories and, generally, in the north and mid-north areas of Canada.

Recommendations for Further Research

The national study of Aboriginal housing conditions concludes with the following recommendations:

- There is a need to examine how existing support mechanisms and organizations within the Aboriginal community can be strengthened to better address underlying problems of poverty.
- Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples need to establish a better dialogue to develop solutions to common problems of housing and poverty.
- Researchers must continue to develop appropriate housing designs for rural and remote areas.
- Researchers must attempt to fill in remaining data gaps on Aboriginal housing.
- The ways in which housing can enhance the economic base in Aboriginal communities should be explored.

This issue of *Research & Development Highlights* has been produced as part of a concerted research program that aims to better understand Aboriginal housing conditions in Canada today. This work draws on comprehensive studies of Aboriginal peoples and their housing conditions across the country. These studies may be obtained from the Canadian Housing Information Centre, (613) 748-2367.

For further information about the contents of this highlight, contact Mr. John Engeland, Social and Economic Policy and Research Division, CMHC, (613) 748-2799.

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For more information on CMHC housing research, contact:

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