



Housing Need among the Inuit in Canada, 1991

Introduction

Although government shelter assistance of various kinds has provided an affordable roof over the heads of a large proportion of Inuit households, many still reside in dwellings that are crowded and often below adequacy standards. This issue of *Research and Development Highlights* presents an overview of their housing situation and examines some of the root causes of their high level of housing need.

The Data

The information and data provided in this issue primarily come from special tabulations using two of the richest and most comprehensive information sources available for understanding the housing situation of Canadian Aboriginal people—the *Aboriginal Peoples Survey* and the 1991 Census. The housing standards of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's core housing need model are applied to these data to assess housing need among the Inuit. Households whose housing does not meet one or more of the standards for adequacy, suitability or affordability and whose income is insufficient to afford rental housing that does meet standards are considered to be in core housing need.

Findings

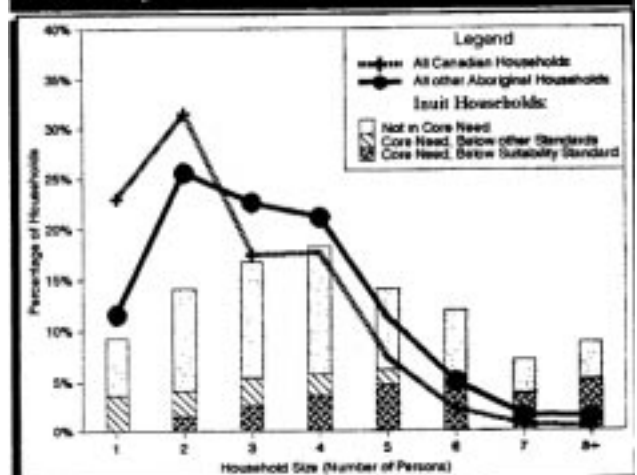
The Overall Picture

In 1991, there were 36,080 persons who identified as Inuit residing in 9,655 Inuit households. Forty percent of Inuit households are in core housing need and these households are home to 47% of the Inuit population.

The fact that a significantly higher proportion of Inuit people than Inuit households are in core housing need is a strong clue as to the main issue underlying their housing need—crowding. Inuit households are almost three times as likely as other Aboriginal households to be in core housing need and fall below the suitability standard and more than twenty times as likely as non-Aboriginal households to be in this situation. Overall, 26% of Inuit households are in core housing need and crowded.

**Crowding is the
major problem for
Inuit households.**

Figure 1: Proportion of Inuit, Other Aboriginal and Canadian Households by Size Showing Core Housing Need with Suitability Isolated for Inuit Households



Crowding is primarily related to large household size among the Inuit. Inuit households average 4.3 persons per household in contrast to 3.3 persons in other off-reserve Aboriginal and 2.7 persons in non-Aboriginal households. Figure 1 shows that a much larger proportion of Inuit households contain 5 or more persons. It also indicates that high proportions of these households are in core housing need and that crowding is a significant cause of core housing need.

Inuit households are larger and their housing crowded primarily for the following reasons:

- a very large proportion of Inuit households include children under the age of 15;
- short life expectancy in the past has resulted in relatively few older Inuit people who, in the population at large, tend to live in smaller households; and
- a culture that encourages extended families, combined with a shortage of housing in many northern and remote communities, has resulted in many extended households and a large proportion of households with children aged 15 and over.

These factors are particularly important among the 68% of Inuit households residing in small, rural communities¹, almost all of which are located in the Far North.² In these communities, 84% of Inuit households have children and 29% are extended. Core housing need is generally high in these communities and crowding a serious issue. For example, other studies have shown that crowded housing among the Inuit is a causative factor in the spread of disease which is often a cause of long-term disability. Irrespective of location, core housing need levels are even higher when extended households include either a person with a disability or a lone parent.

Economic Correlates of Core Housing Need

High levels of core housing need are very closely tied to low household incomes, particularly in the Far North where constructing and maintaining housing is expensive. For example, average household income in the Northwest Territories is only 61% that of non-Aboriginal households, and on a per-capita basis is only 44% that of non-Aboriginal people.³

Low household income is largely tied to the employment characteristics and education levels of non-senior Inuit adults. A minority of working-age Inuit are employed. Many who do work are in insecure semi-skilled and unskilled jobs. These circumstances exist mainly because a large proportion of non-senior Inuit adults have low levels of schooling and the Far North has a limited formal economic base. In addition, many Inuit in the Far North make their living at least partially through subsistence activities and trading in-kind which simply does not generate monetary income.

Remarkably, despite very low average household income, 10% overall and only 6% of Inuit in the Far North are in core housing need and spend 30% or more of their income for shelter. The low level of affordability problems is related to two factors: a very large number of Inuit households in the Far North find accommodations in subsidized housing; and the full cost of rent is provided to social assistance recipients in the Northwest Territories. However, low income does have a major impact upon the level of core housing because it restricts the housing choice of many Inuit to small, modest social housing. As a result, large families and many who double up because of a shortage of social housing stock often fall below today's housing suitability standard.

¹ *Rural* communities or areas are defined as those which had not attained a population concentration of at least 1,000 or a population density of at least 400 persons per square kilometre at the previous (1986) Census.

² *The Far North* is defined here as a region which covers the Yukon, Northwest Territories, Labrador, and roughly the northern half of Quebec.

³ Average per capita income is the average income available to each household resident

Geographical Variations in the Incidence of Housing Need

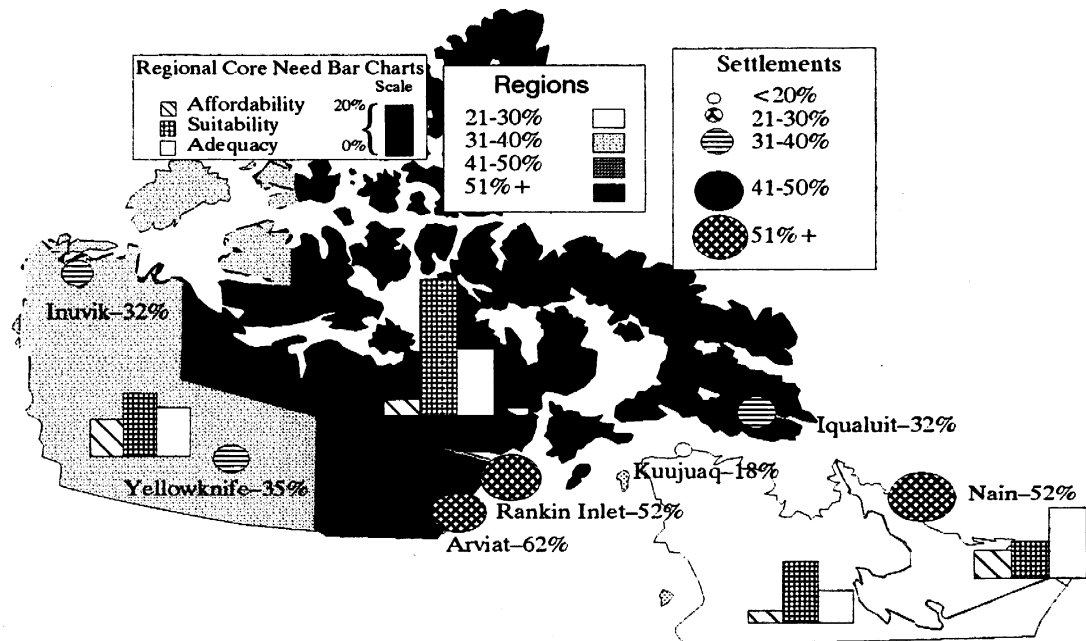
Core housing need among the Inuit is highest in the Far North, where 77% of Inuit households and 90% of the Inuit population are located. There, 45% of Inuit households are in core housing need, in contrast to 24% of those residing elsewhere in Canada. Within the Far North, levels of core housing need vary considerably from region to region, ranging from a low of 29% in northern Quebec (Nunavik) to a high of 55% in the area soon to become Nunavut (see Figure 2). Within the Far North, core housing need also tends to peak in smaller, rural communities such as Nain, Arviat, and Rankin Inlet in contrast to larger centres such as Yellowknife, Iqaluit, or Inuvik.

In the Far North, differences in the incidence of core housing need are largely tied to the prevalence of crowding. Crowding problems are most acute in rented accommodations, most of which is public housing. The Inuit predominantly rent in two regions in the far north—Nunavik (96%) and the future Nunavut (91%), but crowding problems are highly focused among Inuit renter households in the future Nunavut. There, 45% of renters are in core housing need and below the suitability standard.

In addition, 16% of Inuit households are in core housing need and below the adequacy standard, well above the 9% level among other Aboriginal people and six times higher than the proportion in the non-Aboriginal population. Almost all Inuit core need households below the adequacy standard are located in the Far North, primarily in smaller, rural communities.

In spite of being relatively new, almost a fifth of the Inuit housing stock in the Far North is below the adequacy standard. A number of factors account for this situation. Housing in the Far North often experiences premature deterioration due to the high levels of wear and tear that come with crowding. On top of this, extreme climatic conditions and the need to spend much of the year indoors accelerate the deterioration of housing materials, particularly in crowded dwellings. In addition, many dwellings become subject to wear and tear when the proceeds of hunting, fishing and gathering are processed in the home. Finally, outside of the social housing rental stock, low incomes coupled with high maintenance costs make upkeep extremely unaffordable.

Figure 2: Core Need Levels among the Inuit by Region and Selected Inuit Settlements Showing Proportions Below Core Need Standards



In Labrador, a significant proportion of the housing stock is without the water and sewage disposal facilities required for adequate bathroom facilities. Unlike the other regions of the Far North, a large proportion of low-income Inuit households are owners in Labrador, reflecting the thrust of the federal Rural and Native Housing Program in the region. While the percentage of owners in core housing need (30%) is well below that of renters in the remainder of the Far North, it is twice that of Inuit owners in the remainder of the country. Seventy-seven percent of these Labrador Inuit owners in core housing need live in housing below the adequacy standard.

Conclusion

Large household size, an inadequate housing supply, and housing units that are often too small mean that 40% of Inuit households fall into core housing need because of serious and frequent crowding problems. Inuit households are also likely to be in core housing need and living in housing that, despite being relatively new, is in poor repair. Inuit housing is subject to high wear and tear due to crowded living conditions, the effects of climatic extremes, and the processing of hunting and gathering yields in the home. Many Inuit households of the Far North find their housing choices restricted. They live in housing that is crowded and in poor repair because they have low incomes and cannot afford to build or maintain housing which fully meets their needs. At the same time, few low-income Inuit are in core housing need and dedicate 30% or more of their income to shelter because a very large proportion of Inuit live in the only option available given their means—small, modest subsidized social housing.

This issue of *Research and 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. For further information about the contents of this highlight, contact Mr. John Engeland, Research Division, at (613) 748-2799 or e-mail: jengelan@cmhc.e-mail.com

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