

# URBAN INDIGENOUS **HOUSING** **STUDY**

## **A Knowledge Building Project**

*Understanding the housing challenges & needs of urban  
Indigenous community members living in Smithers, Telkwa,  
Houston & surrounding area*



## Acknowledgements

The Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre wishes to acknowledge that this knowledge building project was funded through the Homeless Community Action Grant program in partnership with Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC).

We are grateful for the support and expertise of Plan 54 Consulting and Trauma Informed Practitioner Sandra Martin Harris for their partnership on this project. We wish to acknowledge our staff, board of directors and each of our community members for contributing to a greater understanding of urban based Indigenous housing needs in our region.

We acknowledge that this study was conducted on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Witsuwit'en Nation.

*As this document draws upon sensitive Indigenous knowledge, the information contained within this document must be honored. Therefore, the Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre specifically requests that third parties do not utilize or reproduce this information without our organization's permission to ensure integrity of the intent of this Indigenous-led project.*

## Project Team

### Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre Staff

- Annette Morgan, Executive Director
- Lydia Howard, Housing Advisor
- Emma Loverin, Cultural Connections & Housing Program
- Stacy Holland, Smithers Housing Support Worker
- Dustyn Standbridge, Houston Housing Support Worker

### Consulting Team

- Alison Watson, MPLAN, MCIP, RPP, Plan 54 Consulting
- Sandra Martin Harris, Focusing Complex Trauma Practitioner
- Lorraine Copas, Executive Director, SPARC BC

*Title page photograph by Camus Photography*



## **A Message from our Executive Director, Annette Morgan:**

As a Gitksan woman in Indigenous leadership providing services on Witsuwit'en territory for over 20 years, I believe this study gives voice to the true nature of the urban Indigenous needs in our ever-changing economy.

I want to acknowledge the work and efforts that have gone into producing this study. Specifically, the housing team at Dze Լ K'ant Friendship Centre and well as our project partners. I also want to thank all of the community members who took the time to share their housing stories and knowledge with us and this speaks to the strength and resilience of the urban Indigenous people in this area.

This document lays a foundation for a better understanding of the housing needs of our most under-served community members. It gives voice to the struggles people are facing in our community and the need for cultural approaches to wellbeing.

It is now time to act upon these stories that have been shared. It is our shared responsibility to make changes and this will only be possible with a collaborative approach.

The most important outcome of this study is that it gives voice to the community knowledge shared by off reserve people about the importance of Indigenous led housing. It is my goal that by working together with municipal, provincial and federal governments we can continue to move forward in the right direction.

Annette Morgan, Nox Stikine  
Executive Director, Dze Լ K'ant Friendship Centre

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# About the Dze Ɓ K'ant Friendship Centre

The Dze Ɓ K'ant Friendship Centre Society is an organization guided by Indigenous values. We provide activities, services and information in the communities of Smithers, Houston, Dease Lake and surrounding areas. We focus on developing skills and strengths while incorporating spiritual, emotional, mental and physical well-being to help those we serve to become self-sufficient and self-reliant. The Friendship Centre is dedicated to promoting awareness among all people.

## Did you know the Dze Ɓ K'ant Friendship Centre has made housing a key strategic priority?

Below are highlights from our progress toward increased culturally safe housing and supports in our communities:

- The Dze Ɓ K'ant Friendship Centre **has made housing a key priority** and we have been working actively since 2018 to increase community capacity to ensure Indigenous led housing and trauma informed housing/homelessness support services are available in the communities we serve.
- In 2019 the Dze Ɓ K'ant Housing society was incorporated. This society was developed to ensure we can **move toward our goals of developing and operating affordable housing** facilities in the communities we serve.
- In 2020 the Dze Ɓ K'ant Friendship Centre received funding to **create our community's first Indigenous led housing support program for urban based Indigenous peoples**. This enabled us to hire fulltime staff in Smithers and Houston to provide culturally specific and trauma informed support and basic needs services to urban based Indigenous people who are homelessness and at risk of homelessness. Our housing staff reported 5,621 client contact points in 2020 during the height of the pandemic, demonstrating the level of care and commitment our staff provide regarding culturally appropriate supports, advocacy, problem solving with clients, check-ins, information, and resources.
- In 2021 the Dze Ɓ K'ant Housing Society's affordable housing project for families and elders was selected by BC Housing. This will be **our community's first Indigenous led urban based housing project**, providing culturally safe approach to housing and services. Construction is planned for Spring 2023 on land at 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Main Street in Smithers through a partnership with the Town of Smithers. We are pleased to have engaged provincial, federal, and municipal support for this important project. In 2020 CMHC became involved as a key contributing funder. As such we now have provincial, federal, and municipal support for this project



- In 2022 the Dze ƛ K'ant Friendship Centre, in partnership with the Town of Smithers, received a Strengthening Communities Grant (UBCM) for an **Indigenous Outreach Worker Pilot Project**, allowing us to hire two outreach workers for evening/weekend shifts to provide culturally supportive services to those experiencing homelessness in the community of Smithers.

*The Dze ƛ K'ant Friendship Centre **has made housing a key priority** and we have been working actively since 2018 to **increase community capacity** to ensure **Indigenous led** housing and **trauma informed** housing/homelessness support services are available in the communities we serve.*



# About this Housing Study

Throughout late 2021 and early 2022 the Dze ƛ K'ant Friendship Centre conducted our organization's first Urban Indigenous Housing Study. Our goal was to dig deeper into the specific challenges facing urban based Indigenous people living off reserve in Smithers, Houston, Telkwa and surrounding areas. This study allowed our organization to fill an important information gap, made possible through our Indigenous-led and trauma informed knowledge gathering process.

Our study is unique in that it asks questions that pertain specifically to urban based Indigenous people's experiences such as colonial harms including residential schools, land displacement, and racism/discrimination, to better understand not only the causes of housing inequity being experienced by Indigenous people, but also the path forward.

## Why this Housing Study is Needed

There are many ways that data on housing is collected; local governments in BC are legislatively required to complete housing need reports every five years and the Canada census collects a range of statistical information that includes housing affordability, availability, and suitability data. The Province of BC also funds homeless counts in select communities around BC of which Smithers is one of these communities.

While local housing reports and available data identifies broader statistical trends related to housing, available information is **not Indigenous focused and there are significant knowledge gaps** regarding the unique local housing situation experienced by urban based Indigenous residents.

Many of the local housing studies identify homelessness and Indigenous housing as key areas of local housing need, but **data sets are limited due to the lack of Indigenous community member participation in these engagement processes**. Many Indigenous residents may not feel comfortable sharing their stories and participating in these processes.

Current studies are **limited by geographic scope**, delineated by local government boundaries. The result is a lack of understanding of the dynamic movement of Indigenous residents between communities in search of housing.

The Provincial Homelessness Counts conducted in Smithers demonstrate that Indigenous people are significantly overrepresented in homelessness populations, currently the vast majority of homeless individuals in Smithers are Indigenous (93% of those without homes in 2021 Smithers count were Indigenous). However, there **has yet to be a study in our local region that connects the root causes of Indigenous homelessness and housing insecurity issues**.



Stories about urban based Indigenous people's housing challenges have **been largely unheard**. This study brings **important truths to light** to assist our communities to continue **working together toward solutions**.



Camus Photography



## Our Approach: Working in a Good Way

Our project blends Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to research and knowledge building. Importantly, our study has been Indigenous-led and trauma informed. By creating a safe space for stories to be told and truths to be uncovered at the Friendship Centre, our project provided an opportunity for our urban based Indigenous residents to play a central role in identifying housing needs as well as solutions for a stronger future for Indigenous people in our communities

**Whenever Indigenous people come together we honor both the strengths of spirit and wisdom and the hardships our People have lived through. Indigenous led processes help create safe spaces, to listen, share and lead courageous conversations about lack of adequate housing. We need to be able to listen to the hardships of personal stories that may be shared.**



Wii Esdes, Sandra Martin Harris  
Trauma Informed Practitioner  
Witsuwit'en Nation

**For our study, working in a good way has included:**

- **Ongoing guidance and direction from senior management and our board of directors.** Our senior management and board of directors includes members from Witsuwit'en, Gitksan and Metis Nations. The Dze ŁK'ant Friendship Centre's board members were able to bring forth their traditional leadership approaches, personal knowledge and lived experiences of housing challenges facing their communities. Inputs from our Board throughout this study have ensured that the study created a safe space for our community to share stories about housing.
- **Trauma-informed community engagement.** We hired Wii Esdes, Sandra Martin Harris, local Witsuwit'en Trauma Informed facilitator to assist our research team to ensure that all aspects of our community engagement materials had an Indigenous trauma-informed lens. The Friendship Centre team, our researchers and Sandra Martin Harris worked together on our sharing circles questions and survey to ensure the questions were relevant to urban based Indigenous people and culturally supportive.
- **Honoring our community members for sharing their knowledge.** Every community member who shared their knowledge with us, whether it was through our survey or participating in a circle sharing, were offered a small gift to honor their time. Gifts provided included traditional medicine, meals, grocery cards as well as winter socks for those experiencing homelessness. We are grateful to our funders for allowing us to prioritize this important aspect of our project.
- **Providing one-on-one support for participants.** Along with promoting the survey online our staff worked with many current clients one-on-one to complete the surveys in a culturally supportive manner. Our housing support team at the Friendship Centre staff in Smithers & Houston were specifically trained by Sandra Martin Harris on how to make space for grief and create a safe space for sharing when doing the in-person surveys. This training also recognized the vicarious trauma our staff face when hearing stories of housing challenges, grief and loss and provided ways to stay emotionally healthy during the process.
- **Indigenous, trauma-informed sharing circles.** Dze ŁK'ant Friendship Centre staff and Sandra Martin Harris conducted trauma informed sharing circles in Smithers and Houston, building on the trust that already exists between our staff and clients and providing necessary supports to ensure everyone felt supported in sharing their stories. Due to Covid-19 the majority of our sharing circles were hosted online. Each circle began with a prayer and intention. Sandra Martin Harris then led our participants through a relaxed discussion that allowed space for difficult experiences to be shared and support to be provided.

**“ It was helpful having the training on how to ask people such deep questions, especially so many people we work with have had traumas. It helped me know what to say, how to approach everything in a sensitive way. We also got help with how to take care of ourselves when doing this work. ”**



Emma Loverin, Dze Ł K'ant  
Housing Support Program,  
Tahltan Nation

**“ Having Sandra Harris present is always like a breath of fresh air, she has a calming demeanor about her. I think it was an excellent idea to have Sandra present due to the nature of the topic as we did discuss some sensitive issues. And providing lunch and honorariums is always welcome. We do live in times of need and it all helps. ”**



Charlotte Euverman,  
Elder & Smithers Circle Participant,  
Witsuwit'en Nation



## Our Knowledge Gathering Process

Our study has been shaped by knowledge gained from the conversations and experiences shared by urban based Indigenous residents, families, and Indigenous service providers.

In total, we heard from **202** people who shared a range of lived experiences and perspectives on housing and homelessness in our survey and sharing circles. Without the strong participation and generous sharing of stories, this project would not have been possible.

We raise our hands to so many of our community members who are struggling with their own housing challenges and still took their time to come together to tell their stories with the desire to create better opportunities for future generations.

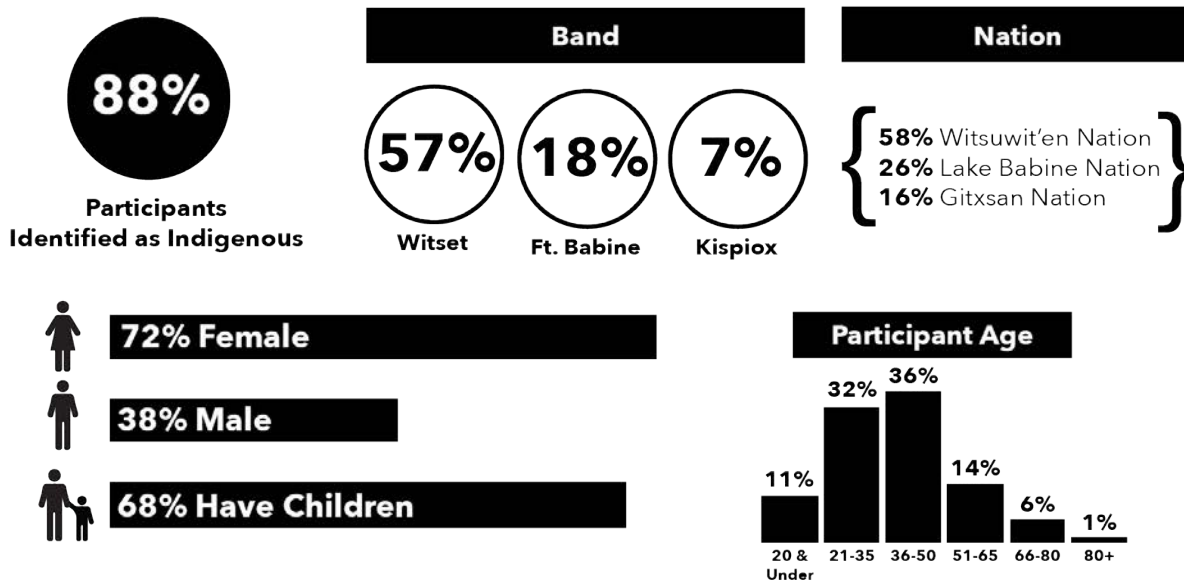
*We **raise our hands in acknowledgement** to those who participated in our knowledge gathering process.*



## Urban Indigenous Housing Survey

Our housing survey participants reflected the diversity of the urban based Indigenous community we serve at the Dze L̓K'ant Friendship Centre.

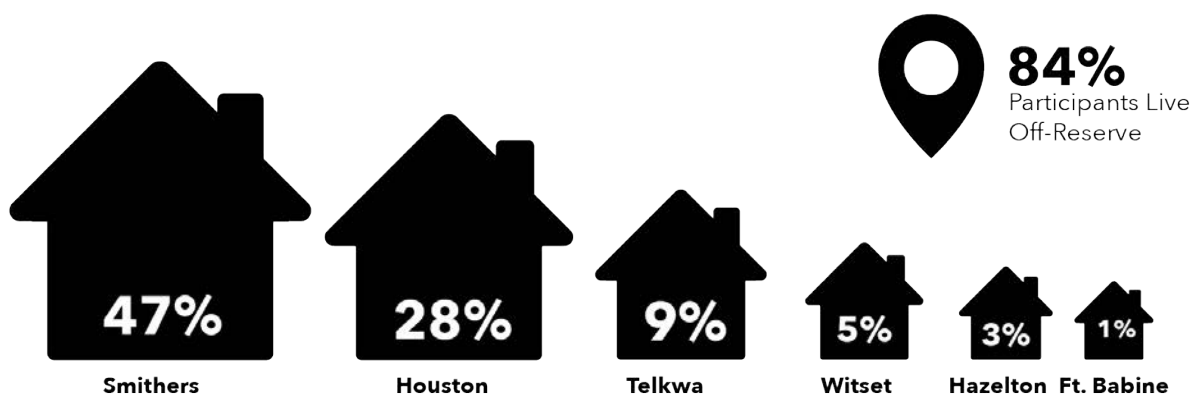
### About those who participated in our survey



### Current housing situation of our survey participants



### Where our survey participants currently live

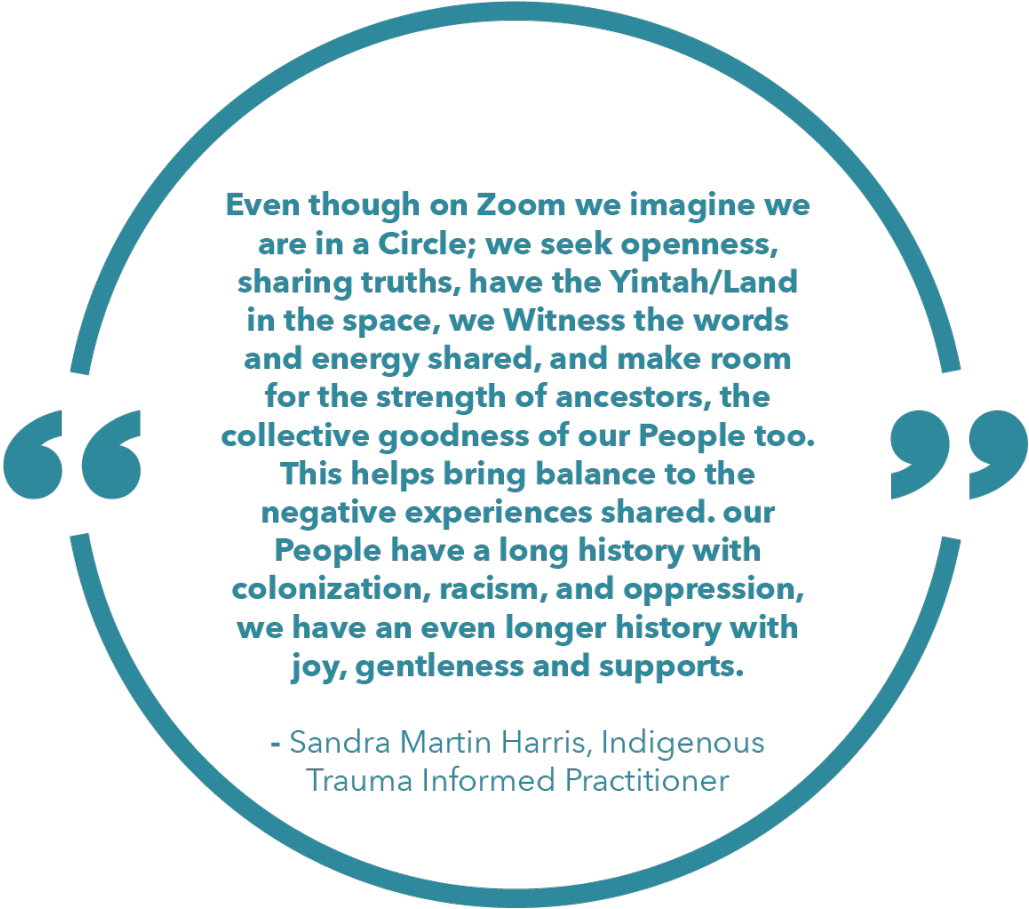


## Sharing Circles

Dze Ɓ K'ant Friendship Centre staff and a local trauma informed facilitator hosted sharing circles with 19 participants to hear about housing challenges, needs, hopes, and dreams from urban based Indigenous individuals and families in a culturally safe and supported environment. The vast majority of those who participated in our study have a deep history and strong cultural connection to this territory and communities. Our community sharing circles included:

- Family Sharing Circle - Smithers (5 participants)
- Women & Elders Circle - Smithers (4 participants)
- Family Sharing Circle - Houston (10 participants)

Despite the challenges of conducting this study during Covid-19 we were pleased to have almost 20 participants in our circles and extremely rich conversations.



**Even though on Zoom we imagine we are in a Circle; we seek openness, sharing truths, have the Yintah/Land in the space, we Witness the words and energy shared, and make room for the strength of ancestors, the collective goodness of our People too. This helps bring balance to the negative experiences shared. our People have a long history with colonization, racism, and oppression, we have an even longer history with joy, gentleness and supports.**

- Sandra Martin Harris, Indigenous Trauma Informed Practitioner

## Indigenous Service Provider Sharing Circles

31 staff members from Indigenous service providers in Smithers and Houston participated in sharing circles, adding a valuable perspective on local housing needs, both from shared lived experiences as Indigenous people as well as through their experience working and supporting urban based Indigenous community members.

Many participating staff of local Indigenous service providers have a long history of supporting our Indigenous residents and families in the area. Indigenous service provider sharing circles included:

- Friendship Centre Board of Directors Sharing circle (6 participants)
- Friendship Centre Houston Staff circle (9 participants)
- Friendship Centre Smithers Staff circle (14 participants)
- Individual interviews with key service providers: Alcohol & Drug Counselling (Dze Ł K'ant Friendship Centre) and Aboriginal Parent Legal Centre



“

**It's so important that community leaders like the Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre can help guide a better understanding of local housing challenges in the Bulkley Valley. Cultural safety, Indigenous Specific Care and Trauma Specific Care as well as Social Justice Informed practices must become more responsive to needs of our community's patrons.**



Mel Basil, Dze L K'ant Alcohol & Drug Counselor, Gitksan & Witsuwit'en Nation

”

“

**We see people coming here with so many housing challenges. We work with them every day so it is good to have input in this study, to help make it better with Smithers with housing.**



Stacy Holland, Dze L K'ant Housing Support Program, Lake Babine Nation

”



## About our Community's Housing Stories

Hundreds of stories were gathered in the survey and sharing circles on housing challenges, needs, experiences, ideas, and dreams. We have tried to incorporate as many of these stories as possible to give voice to our participants. All comments are anonymous, and we have made no changes to the statements of our participants to respect the integrity of their words.

Through our rich knowledge gathering process, 8 common themes, or stories, continued to emerge. The following pages provides an exploration of on each of these stories. Our hope is that this study brings forward many important, and often difficult, stories that were shared in our circles and survey.

*Our hope is that this study brings **forward the important, often difficult, stories** that were shared in our circles & survey.*

### Background to Urban Indigenous Housing Stories Outlined in This Study

Homelessness and housing challenges facing urban Indigenous people in communities across Canada can be directly traced to historical trauma as a result of Canada's history of colonization and in particular the impacts of the residential school system on Indigenous people. The Bulkley Valley has a long history of displacement and housing challenges for Indigenous people stretching back to its very settlement.

In the book, "Shared Histories: Witsuwit'en-Settler Relations, British Columbia 1913-1973" published in 2018, Tyler McCreary illustrates the many ways in which colonization, community planning, legislation, local politics, systemic racism and economic growth marginalized the local Witsuwit'en people, forcing families to leave Smithers, find shelter in sub-standard housing or facing homelessness while around them, the community continued to grow and thrive. The results of this housing study show that in 2022 there is much work to be done to ensure that Indigenous people have opportunities to access housing within urban centres located on Witsuwit'en territory.



# 8 Key Housing Stories

The Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre's Housing Study revealed **8 key housing story themes** that serve to deepen our understanding of Urban Indigenous housing experiences & needs of our residents living in Smithers, Telkwa, Houston & surrounding area.



**Lack of Affordable & Available Housing** is the top challenge facing our Indigenous residents and their families.



**Family & Accessible Housing** are notably in short supply, leading to overcrowding and unsafe conditions.



**Displacement:** Indigenous people are being forced to leave communities like Smithers in search of more affordable housing.



**Homelessness** & intergenerational trauma, is a key challenge faced by many of our Indigenous residents and their families.



**Discrimination & Racism** is widely experienced and a key social barrier to our Indigenous residents accessing housing.



**Colonial Trauma** is deeply connected with current housing challenges, especially the impacts of child apprehension.



**Poor Rental Conditions** are an ongoing concern and are prevalent in the more affordable housing stock that does exist.



**Indigenous Led Culturally Supported housing** is vital for our Indigenous residents in leading a good life in urban centres.



# Unaffordable & Unavailable Rental Housing

The most common story shared throughout our study was about the overall lack of affordable and available rental housing available throughout the area. Notably, the high cost of housing was the #1 housing issue identified in our survey.

## Lack of Affordable Housing

The lack of affordable rental housing was identified as the top challenge facing urban based Indigenous residents and their family members. Many stories were shared about difficulties finding housing on limited incomes. Participants talked about the rising rents and difficulty paying rent on limited incomes or assistance. These challenges were shared by working families, elders, and people on income assistance/disability assistance.

## Lack of Available & Suitable Housing

Along with challenges in finding an affordable rental, many participants shared stories about the limited number of rentals in our area and often the rentals available did not suit their needs. Survey and sharing circles brought forward the following key concerns:

- There are long rental housing waitlists in all communities, both on and off reserve.
- Many reported being on waitlists for social housing in Smithers for over 10 years.
- There is a lack of suitable larger rental units to accommodate families, especially in Smithers.

*"What I think prohibits a lot of people from renting is the high cost of rents all over." - Circle Participant, Smithers*



**69%**

Cannot afford the rent or mortgage

*"My wish is affordable. I feel bad that some moms and dads are taking on three or four paying jobs to pay and not being able to spend time with their children and having to pay for childcare". - Service Provider, Smithers*



According to BC Housing, housing is considered affordable when **30% or less of a household's gross income goes towards paying for housing costs**. For example, if a household is spending more than 30% of income on rent and utilities is it not considered affordable.



- There is a lack of accessible units to accommodate those with accessibility challenges, particularly for elders or those with long-term disabilities.
- Many shared they have not had a chance at rental housing due to the highly competitive market. A common challenge identified was not being able to provide references when trying to rent after living on on-reserve housing or living with family members.
- There were many stories about the stress and strain put on families from not being able to secure housing.

*"I'm using a wheelchair from Red Cross and I don't have any ramps in my house. It's the two level. So, have to get off the wheelchair and walk up the stairs, which is at most times debilitating."* – Circle Participant, Smithers

***Affordable housing was identified as a key housing need in the survey. 93% of participants selected **affordable rental housing** as their top concern.***



**68%** Would like to own their home, a large gap from current **25%** level of ownership.




*"I've been applying for native housing, probably since I was 19 years old and I've never gotten in."* – Circle Participant, Smithers





# Did you know Smithers & Houston have the highest rates of rental households in the Bulkley Valley?

## Renter Households & Average Monthly Rent (2016 Census)

		
COMMUNITY	RENTER HOUSEHOLDS	AVERAGE RENT
Smithers	31%	\$894 / month
Houston	27%	\$734 / month
Telkwa	11%	\$1,087 / month
RDBN Area A	12%	\$780 / month

While the 2016 census gives us an idea of rental households and average monthly rent, local studies in the past 5 years have identified that **rental rates are now higher than what's reported** in the census, especially in Smithers. The BC Non-Profit Housing Association provided additional **Indigenous household data** from the 2016 Smithers census to the Dze ŁK'ant Friendship Centre in 2019.

- The average household income for Indigenous household owners was \$95,946, close to the average income of \$98,276 for non-Indigenous who owners. However, the **average household income for Indigenous households renting was \$42,105.00** compared to an average income of \$54,400 of non-Indigenous renters.
- Indigenous households (32%) are **almost twice as likely to live in unaffordable accommodation** (spending over 30%) and 3 times as likely to spend half of their income on shelter, which is **considered crisis-level spending** by BCNPHA than non-Indigenous households, highlighting the inequalities in housing affordability between Indigenous and non-Indigenous households.
- **48% Indigenous renter households** spent over 30% of their annual income on rent and utilities compared with 36% of non-Indigenous renter households.



## Displacement

The lack of available and affordable housing coupled with social access barriers has led to many Indigenous residents having to leave Smithers to find housing. This results to a loss of supports, family networks and displacement from their traditional territories and the places they call home.

### Displacement from Smithers

Many stories were shared about being pushed out of the community through a lack of housing and increased rents. Many residents reported being forced to move away from Smithers to Houston and rural areas to find affordable and available housing. Participants shared that this dynamic has occurred in Smithers for many years and is now at crisis point with the rising rents, high demand, and low housing supply.



**56%**

Have had to move from their home community to find housing

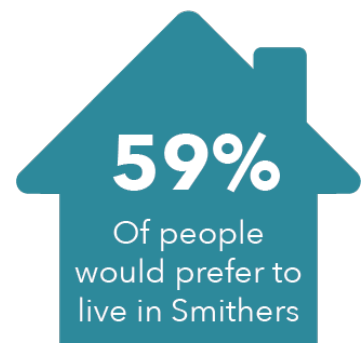
*"I've had to relocate many of my clients to other cities or towns because there is no housing in the area. This causes a lot of clients to lose their support." - Service Provider, Smithers*

### Distance to Services & Supports

Service providers shared their challenges of supporting clients living further away from supports based in Smithers. Single parents, elders, and those with medical needs and mental health challenges particularly struggle as they rely on family or friends for support and transportation. It was noted that while Houston has a greater supply of affordable housing, the new industrial projects in the area have significantly increased rents in Houston in the past year.

Service providers and community members shared that people strongly feel they have been moved out of Smithers to Houston to a community that does not have the range of amenities, services, and supports, particularly to meet the needs of clients and families with complex, high risk needs.

While there is more housing available in Houston for low-income people, many residents of Houston shared that those on a limited income still need access to Smithers for affordable groceries, hospital/medical needs, training, and employment opportunities. The limited transit schedule between Houston



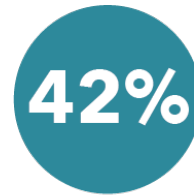
However, only 47% currently live in Smithers and 28% live in Houston

and Smithers was identified as a challenge to accessing Smithers-based services and supports.

The location of housing within communities is also important. Concerns were expressed for Houston families with children living in rental housing located “up the hill” on a busy road and away from the downtown hub of shopping, supports and school.

*There is a **long history of displacement** for Indigenous people in the community of Smithers, which has been well documented in the book “Shared Histories” by Tyler McCreery. Our study is a critical reminder of the **ongoing** displacement of Indigenous people in our communities.*

*“The housing is not here in Smithers, but the help is here.” Service Provider, Smithers*



Survey participants reported **difficulty accessing services and supports** due to distance



# Did you know Indigenous people are being forced to leave Smithers and Telkwa due to lack of housing?

The 2016 census data **highlights the Indigenous population shift** in the Bulkley Valley. Between 2006 and 2016 the population that self-identified as Indigenous has **decreased in Smithers, Telkwa, and the surrounding rural areas and increased in Houston**. Census data and stories shared demonstrates that a disproportionate amount of Indigenous people are leaving communities like Smithers due to lack of affordable rental housing.



## **Houston's Indigenous population increased by 4.5%**

from 12% in 2006 to 16.5% in 2016. This represents a gain of 120 Indigenous residents moving to Houston.



## **Smithers' Indigenous population decreased by 4.5%**

from 15% in 2006 to 10.5% in 2016. This represents a loss of 210 Indigenous residents who left Smithers.



## **Telkwa's Indigenous population decreased by 4.5%**

from 12% in 2006 to 7.5% in 2016. This represents a loss of 60 Indigenous residents who left Telkwa.



## **The RDBN's Electoral Area "A" Indigenous**

**population decreased by 2.5%** from 9% in 2006 to 6.5% in 2016. This represents a loss of 115 Indigenous residents who left the surrounding rural area.

The **decrease in Indigenous populations in most communities does not follow the same general population trends**. According to the 2016 census, most communities experienced overall population growth while Houston's population declined.

This finding critically highlights that **Indigenous people are being most severely impacted by the housing crisis**, finding themselves having to **relocate to Houston to find affordable and available housing while non-Indigenous populations increase in communities where housing and services are more desirable**.





## Discrimination & Racism

Stories of discrimination and racism were present throughout all our housing discussions. Many reported being discriminated against when seeking housing, others reported living in constant fear of eviction from landlords. These stories highlight that urban based Indigenous people are experiencing unique social barriers in our communities when accessing and maintaining housing which is closely tied to ongoing impacts of colonization.

### Landlord Discrimination

Many participants identified that they also experienced landlord discrimination & racism when trying to access housing. This included:

- Feeling unfairly treated regarding waitlists for social housing in Smithers or Telkwa.
- Not hearing back from landlords after applying.
- Being asked to provide references and other application screening requirements, over and above what's typically required or even legal.

*"There are vacant places around, but I can't get a place. So many setbacks, including discrimination even if we have good references." - Circle Participant, Smithers*

33%

Identified that **racism & discrimination** was a key challenge to accessing housing

### Fear of Eviction

With housing shortages and access barriers, many shared stories about a strong fear of being evicted and becoming homeless. Many participants shared that they will avoid talking to landlords to report repairs or tenancy concerns due to a strong fear of eviction. Fear of eviction was identified as a source of ongoing stress for individuals and their families.

*"I'm terrified to make any kind of noise because, I don't want to get kicked out, because there's nowhere to go." - Circle Participant, Smithers*

40%

Identified **risk of eviction** as a concern

Indigenous service providers reported clients staying in unsafe housing situations due to the lack of safe housing alternatives and underreporting tenancy issues for fear of eviction. Examples shared include unsafe activities of other tenants, and families and seniors feeling physically unsafe due to lack of repairs, neighboring drug use and being in abusive situations.

**Discrimination. Everyone's the bad person 'Oh I rented to a native and they wrecked the place so now I won't rent to them'.**

- Survey Participant



*Camus Photography*

**In my own experience trying to find a place to rent, it puts people in tough positions too. Yeah, racism, it's tough. It's really tough in Smithers. I probably could, and it's wrong to say, but I could probably get away with identifying as Chinese and having a better chance at housing, than identifying myself as Indigenous.**

- Circle Participant



*Camus Photography*



# Poor Rental Conditions

Poor rental housing conditions were a common concern shared in our circles. Those who have managed to find an affordable rental reported it to be in extremely poor condition, most participants reported that their rental homes required essential repairs.

## Poor Condition of Rental Housing

Due to the lack of affordable housing options, many participants reported that individuals and families will take whatever affordable housing is available despite unhealthy and unsafe conditions.

Those living in Houston highlighted that while there was more housing available at lower rents than Smithers, the condition of the homes was extremely poor.

Key concerns related to poor rental housing conditions include:

- Housing in need of maintenance & repairs, with unresponsive landlords. Many tenants are fearful to be considered a nuisance and lose their housing.
- Unhealthy living conditions, such as excessive mold & rodents.
- Many reported that certain parts of town, particularly in Houston had become dangerous to live in, especially for families, due to drugs and criminal activity at the buildings.

## Personal Safety & Security Concerns

Many identified that staying in housing in poor condition was creating significant safety and security concerns. With unresponsive landlords, concerns were expressed about vehicle vandalism, drug and alcohol use, conflict and noise.

*"What is affordable is not really liveable." - Service Provider, Houston*



*"My friend, she's living in a house with her dad, her brother, her two little girls. It's a two-bedroom apartment and they have mice and everything and it's just not suitable." - Circle Participant, Smithers*



*"The lack of housing presents a ripple effect of challenges to mental health and physical health." - Service Provider, Smithers*



One participant spoke about the common laundry facility being broken, clothing stolen, and being fearful to use the facility. Another spoke of front and back doors being broken and left open.

There were specific concerns for women and children and a sense of desperation to get away from the 'low income' places in Houston for safety reasons but with nowhere to go.

Service providers spoke about unsuitable housing in both Smithers and Houston as a source of on-going client stress, with mental and physical health impacts and unsafe living environments. One participant described the lack of housing as having a ripple effect on holistic health.

*"Due to the supply and demand being so drastic the landlords push people around. I've heard of bed bugs and the landlords refusing to fumigate". - Service Provider, Smithers*

*90% of survey participants want to feel **personally safe & secure** in future housing*

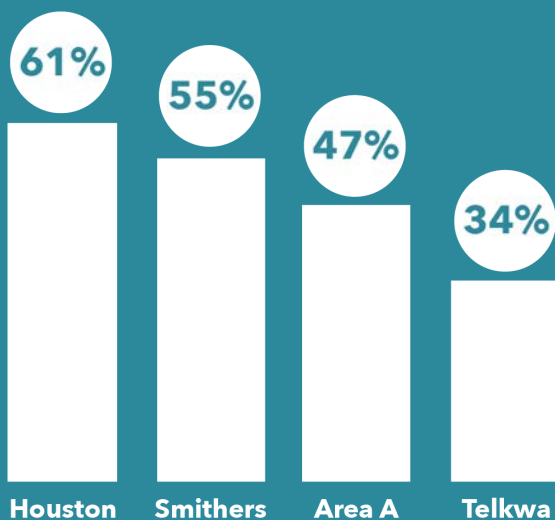




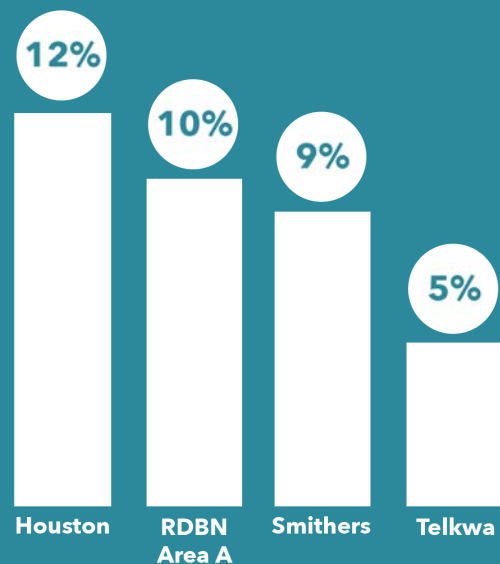
# Did you know Houston has the oldest housing stock in the Bulkley Valley?

2016 census information is consistent with the many stories shared of the poor condition of housing located in Houston.

## Housing Constructed Before 1980



## Housing Requiring Major Repairs



The District of Houston Study (2020) identifies the community's supply of available affordable market housing has led to **an influx of residents from nearby communities looking for affordable housing and rental options**. Further, Houston study reinforces while market rentals in Houston are affordable for low-income residents, these units are **generally regarded as in the poorest condition**. Identified health concerns include mold, asbestos or where rentals are not equipped with working buzzers or locks.

***These findings critically highlight that Indigenous people are finding themselves having to relocate to Houston where housing stock is older and in poor condition.***



## Lack of Family & Accessible Housing

Many stories reflected the lack of suitable housing to meet a diversity of needs, in particular the lack of homes for families and accessible housing for elders or people with disabilities.

### Overcrowding & Hidden Homelessness

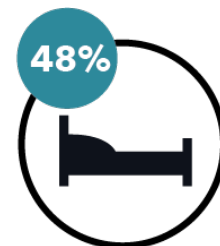
Many stories were shared about how families live together in overcrowded housing due to lack of larger homes and as a means of being able to afford the rent.

Many stories were shared that it is common practice for Indigenous families to 'make space' for everyone. With such limited housing available, those who do have housing, including elders, are taking in family members.

While couch surfing is a common term used to describe those who are precariously housed, our study shows that many urban based Indigenous people are staying with family, sometimes on their couch or on the floor but do not identify themselves as homeless or couch surfing.

In conversations with service providers and community members during our study it is clear that many urban based Indigenous people are living with family members in crowded conditions. Having too many people living in one home was also directly linked with stress and illness as well as "hard lived in homes" that receive high degree of wear due to overcrowding.

*"We have that one spot where there's all those row houses and apartments. It's people living on top of people, and everybody knows what's happening with their neighbour. It's just so much in one spot." – Service Provider, Houston*



**48%** Identified crowded conditions as a top housing challenge

*"I live in a 3-bedroom duplex. My 3 grandkids and my older mum. It's just 3 bedrooms and we are overcrowded" – Survey Participant, Smithers*

## A Barrier to Family Reunification

Service providers pointed out that in many situations, it is not child neglect that necessitates removal of children from their families but unsuitable or unavailable housing.

Additionally, limited access to suitable and safe housing is a significant barrier to the reunification process when parents are working with the Ministry of Children and Families to get their children back. Many living arrangements do not meet Ministry of Children and Family Development requirements, for example rentals do not have enough bedrooms to meet government occupancy standards.

## Lack of Accessible Housing

The lack of accessible housing was identified as a need for elders and those with physical disabilities. Participants shared stories of the challenges elders experience in finding an accessible and safe unit when having to relocate to Smithers for medical reasons.

**The best place to have calmness is in your own home. If you don't have that, then your mental health goes way down as well, just from that, right?**

- Service Provider,  
Smithers

*Our survey participants identified **family** housing, **elder** housing & **physically accessible** as housing types needed*



**93%**  
**FAMILY**  
**HOUSING**



**57%**  
**ELDER**  
**HOUSING**



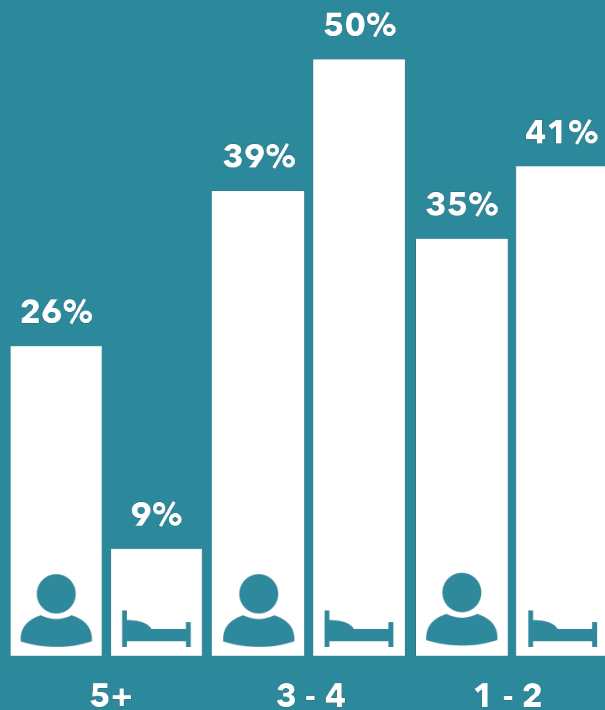
**49%**  
**PHYSICALLY**  
**ACCESSIBLE**  
**HOUSING**

# Did you know there is a shortage of homes large enough for Indigenous families?

Housing is considered suitable by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation when there are **enough bedrooms to accommodate the number of people living in a household.**

Our housing survey **revealed a gap** between the number of bedrooms and the number of people living in a home. This gap is **greatest for large Indigenous families with 5 or more people.**

Number of Indigenous People Compared to Number of Bedrooms in a Home



## Intergenerational Living



80% of survey participants are related to people staying in their home, illustrating the high levels of intergenerational living occurring in Urban Indigenous households.

**80%**

Are related to the people staying in their home

## Preference for Larger Homes

Survey participants identify crowding as an issue and wished they could afford larger homes. Most identified the need for either 4-5 bedrooms or 2-3 bedrooms.

**46%**

4-5  
Bedroom

**45%**

2-3  
Bedroom

**8%**

0-1  
Bedroom





# Homelessness

Homelessness disproportionately impacts urban based Indigenous people in Smithers, Houston, and surrounding area. Our study and the provincial Homeless Count conducted in Smithers in 2021 align in their findings that homelessness is largely a conversation about Indigenous homelessness in our communities.

## Indigenous Homelessness

We heard important stories from 31 people in our survey who did not have permanent housing, 94% of these survey participants identified as Indigenous. This number aligns with the results of the most recent point in time 2021 Provincial homelessness count in Smithers, where there were 33 people who identified as homeless in Smithers, 93% of those identified as Indigenous.



**31**

Participants in our housing survey identified that they were homeless

## Connection with Colonial Trauma, Structural Racism & Homelessness

The Dze Ɓ K'ant Friendship Centre works directly with people experiencing homelessness through our Indigenous housing support program. To better understand their unique experiences, our staff worked with their clients to complete surveys and ensure their stories are heard. Insights from the 31 individuals closely connects colonial harms and homelessness.

*"Me and my hubby and mum and dad have stayed outside now for 5 years. We used to stay under trees, or outside the Friendship Centre. It's nice to be in the trailer" – Survey Participant*

Of those who are currently homeless in our community:

- 90%** Have been impacted by child apprehension and removal, including residential schools (75%), foster care (68%), 60s scoop (50%), and youth group home (36%).
- 85%** Identified stress, traumatic experiences, and addictions as directly connected to housing challenges.



**60%**

Of all survey participants identified housing for those experiencing homelessness or at risk as a key need

**79%** Would like to own their own home or live in an independent rental apartment, 7% stated they want to live in supported housing.

**4X** Majority of those who are homeless have moved an average of 4 times over the last year.



**93%**

The 2021 BC Homelessness count found that 93% of people who were homeless in Smithers were Indigenous

Two times me and my brothers were living in a hotel from September till the end of October, due to my mom being ill.

- Survey Participant





# Deepening our understanding of Indigenous people's homelessness

Below is important information shared by urban based Indigenous people who are homeless in our community.

## DIVERSE EXPERIENCES

- 55%** Have children
- 55%** Female
- 55%** Stay in Smithers (29% Houston)
- 61%** Under 35 years of age
- 85%** Unsure if they can stay long-term in their current location



## HOUSING CHALLENGES

Top housing challenges for those without permanent housing:



- 71%** Cannot afford rent
- 64%** Poor condition
- 64%** Addiction / substance abuse
- 61%** Job loss
- 57%** Crowded conditions

## IMPACTS

Survey findings illustrate the impact of housing challenges for those who do not have permanent housing:

**85%**  
Stress,  
trauma,  
addictions

**78%**  
Resulted in  
homelessness

**67%**  
Cultural /  
family  
disconnect

**59%**  
Had to  
move away  
from home

## TEMPORARY HOUSING

Types of temporary housing used in 2021 by survey participants without a permanent home:



- 41%** Tent / outdoors
- 35%** Supported living facility
- 29%** Emergency shelter
- 29%** Transition house

## PRESSURE ON FAMILIES

Lack of access to shelters has broad implications, increasing pressure on families & elders who have housing, increasing overcrowding and leading to people with complex needs to be supported by already struggling families.



**45%**  
Staying in Homes  
With 5+ People

## COMMUNITY IMPACTS

Family members & friends who have housing are often relied upon to support those who are homeless. In our survey, **46%** of those that do not have permanent housing were staying the night with family or friends in an apartment or house.



## HOUSING SUPPORTS

Survey participants who do not have housing identified they would use of the following supports in Indigenous housing:



- 76%** Addictions
- 69%** Emotional & mental health
- 69%** Basic needs
- 66%** Training & education
- 62%** Cultural connection

## MISTRUST OF SHELTER SYSTEM

Due to mistrust of systems due to lack of cultural safety, most homeless participants did not wish to stay in the shelter system. Survey participants identified their key challenges as:

**93%**  
Affordable  
rental  
housing

**72%**  
Access to  
homelessness  
supports

**69%**  
Family  
housing

**62%**  
Culturally  
supported  
housing

# Local urban Indigenous experiences of living without homes in our communities

31 people who completed our survey do not have a permanent home. Below are some of their stories.

*"Me and my brothers were living with my mom in Telkwa for about 8 years and she passed away on the 13th of this month and we have no dads, so my grandparents took us in we stay in Fort Babine for the time being, I'm looking for a place for us in Smithers so I can work and my brothers can finish school."*

*"Just couch surfing. All the clothes I had at the place I was staying are gone. Just have what's on my back. Just going to PLN and Salvation Army for food. We keep warm in the banks, in Royal Bank to stay warm. Hoping to stay at the trailers. I keep losing everything, my wallet, my possessions."*

*"I am a refugee in my homelands. I would consider myself from Smithers but am staying at my sisters in Houston. There is nowhere for me to rent. I would rather rent out of town."*

*"Living off res. we have no help have 8 children and 3 adults living in a 3-bedroom trailer that is falling apart living on res no housing at all."*

*"Having no place of my own. Couch surfing right now. Really hard to find a place and people taking places from out of town. We need low-income housing, it's not that people choose to be homeless. People look down on us, it saddens me. I really didn't think I would be in this position. More workers are coming here, endangering young women just because they are from out of town. Housing, safety, and work that's the challenges. Judgements and racism is hindering my goals."*

*"I was homeless for 6-7 years. Needed a warm place. Helped us out with the trailer. I want to try to look for a place to rent. Hard to look for a place."*

*"Looking for a place, couch surfing. It's getting cold outside and it's very hard to find an affordable place."*

*"I've been looking for housing for the past 2 years. I haven't had much luck because of past situations where the people who were staying with me got out of control.... I don't really stand a chance because they just judge me based on what they've heard which is mostly made-up rumors."*





# The Impact of Colonial Trauma on Housing Security

The impacts of colonial systems such as the *Indian Act*, residential school system, the 60s scoop and ongoing child apprehension continue to be felt deeply in our communities. There is a deep connection between structural racism, colonial trauma and current housing inequities facing urban based Indigenous People in the communities we serve.

## Historic & Systemic Barriers to Accessing Housing

Many Indigenous service providers linked the history of colonialization, residential schools, structural racism and limited Indigenous focussed education, health and housing provision as unique challenges urban based Indigenous people face in our communities. Indigenous service providers voiced that these systemic barriers perpetuate housing inequality.

Colonial systems and ongoing structural racism were brought forward by those supporting urban based people as the root cause of challenges facing Indigenous community members. Indigenous service providers highlighted how these systems have led to displacement from traditional territories and communities, disconnection from family networks and loss of cultural knowledge and practices.

Many stories illustrated the underlying complexities contributing to current housing challenges. These include:

- The historic and ongoing removal of Indigenous children has impacted all aspects of life, creating generations upon generations of disconnection and trauma.

*"Odds are against us if we want to have a family and live a dream in a community. We need the odds to be for us." - Service Provider, Smithers.*



Identified that lack of housing **created disconnect** from their family, culture and/or community

*"I feel a loss that caused depression and lead to substance abuse." Survey Participant*



**82%**

Of all 152 survey respondents, 82% have been **impacted by colonial systems of child apprehension** (residential school, 60s scoop & foster care system)

- Loss of communal living ways and traditional healthy boundaries is a direct result of child removal.
- Intergenerational trauma and internalized racism.
- Loss of traditional living structure & feeling unwelcome on their own traditional territories.
- Mental health, physical health and addictions, all deeply impacting housing stability were viewed by majority of participants as linked directly with colonial traumas and child removal experiences.
- Complex systems of funding for Indigenous housing and a historic lack of prioritization by governments for specific for Indigenous led projects both on and off reserved was raised as contributing to current housing challenges.

*"I had to learn how to be good to myself, be a good wife and mother." - Survey Participant*



### **History of Child Apprehension & Removal and the Impact on Housing Stability**

Our survey included specific questions about colonial child apprehension due to the long held Indigenous knowledge that these systems are at the root of challenging facing Indigenous people today. Of the 152 people who completed our survey:

- 65%** Reported being impacted by residential schools either directly and indirectly (residential school survivors as well as children and grandchildren of survivors).
- 31%** Had been impacted by 60's Scoop either by being personally removed as children from their families in the 1960s or having their children removed.
- 19%** Had been removed from family and had lived in group homes in their youth.
- 43%** Had been in foster care or had children removed into foster care.
- 42%** Indicated that homelessness in their family (e.g., a family member) was directly connected to child apprehension systems.

Our staff were **trained to support our participants** when completing the survey questions related to their family history of child apprehension, removal, and its impact on their housing.

Many personal stories were shared in the survey about how colonial systems of control of Indigenous people have impacted people and their families, including themes of:

- Abuse & intergenerational trauma
- Depression, anger, grief & loss
- Physical, mental health & wellness
- Addictions & homelessness
- Domestic violence & fragmented families
- Disconnected from culture and loneliness
- Long history with disease

*Despite incredible resilience present in our urban based Indigenous communities, the rights of Indigenous people as set out in UNDRIP are **yet to be realized** in our communities.*



Camus Photography



# The Need for Indigenous Led Culturally Supported Housing

Indigenous led, culturally supported housing was identified in our study as vital in providing the opportunity for Indigenous people in our communities to lead a good life and provide for future generations.

## Indigenous Led & Culturally Safe Housing

Most participants, both in the survey and sharing circles, shared a holistic approach to Indigenous led culturally safe housing. Participants felt that all aspects of planning, design, and operation of housing must be culturally safe and responsive to unique needs of urban based Indigenous residents who would live there.

While participants focused on the importance of a safe, secure, and affordable home, many participants in our study identified the opportunity that culturally safe Indigenous housing would have for overall increases in health and wellbeing. Many participants strongly felt that Indigenous housing should be about reconnecting individuals and their families to their cultural ways, traditions, as a basis for much needed healing. Discussions with Indigenous service providers made the connection between Indigenous led urban based housing as a tangible step toward reconciliation.

Many participants in our sharing circles spoke about their dreams for housing where they could feel accepted, safe, and not afraid to use the facility. They hoped to live in a building where they were treated fairly, and they wished to have assurances that housing will remain culturally safe and Indigenous led over the long term.

*"As you talk about the cultural safe building, to me is a building where I could go to live and feel comfortable that I could practice my Witsuwit'en culture." - Circle Participant, Smithers*



93% Of survey respondents would make use of a **wide range of culturally safe supports & services** within future Indigenous housing

*"Staffing well trained in trauma, addictions and not just Witsuwit'en but other nations laws and traditions - be willing to learn about that nation." - Service Provider, Smithers*



## Supports & Staffing

Many stories shared emphasized that Indigenous housing would be much more than just a roof over their head. Many expressed the need for a range of supports as an essential feature of Indigenous housing. This included ensuring Indigenous staff are hired, that all housing staff are trained in trauma, addictions, local Indigenous culture and protocols. Many talked about the need for the housing to support the diverse backgrounds and traditions of our local urban based Indigenous people including Witsuwit'en, Gitksan, Lake Babine Nation, Metis peoples.

Services of value to our participants ranged from home care for elders, supports for those with physical, medical, and mental health needs, and many ideas to support residents to be successful in their residence. Community kitchens, learning opportunities, social and cultural gatherings and activities were discussed as important to ensure a sense of home and belonging. Many noted specific concerns about the safety and security of women and children and the needs for culturally specific supports for family wellbeing and healing.

*"I really like the idea of having a common room, because that way the residents can have little get togethers that will feel more like home. Another good idea to bring in short programs for them in the common room like beading sessions or making home cooked meals together. I like that common room." - Circle Participant, Smithers*

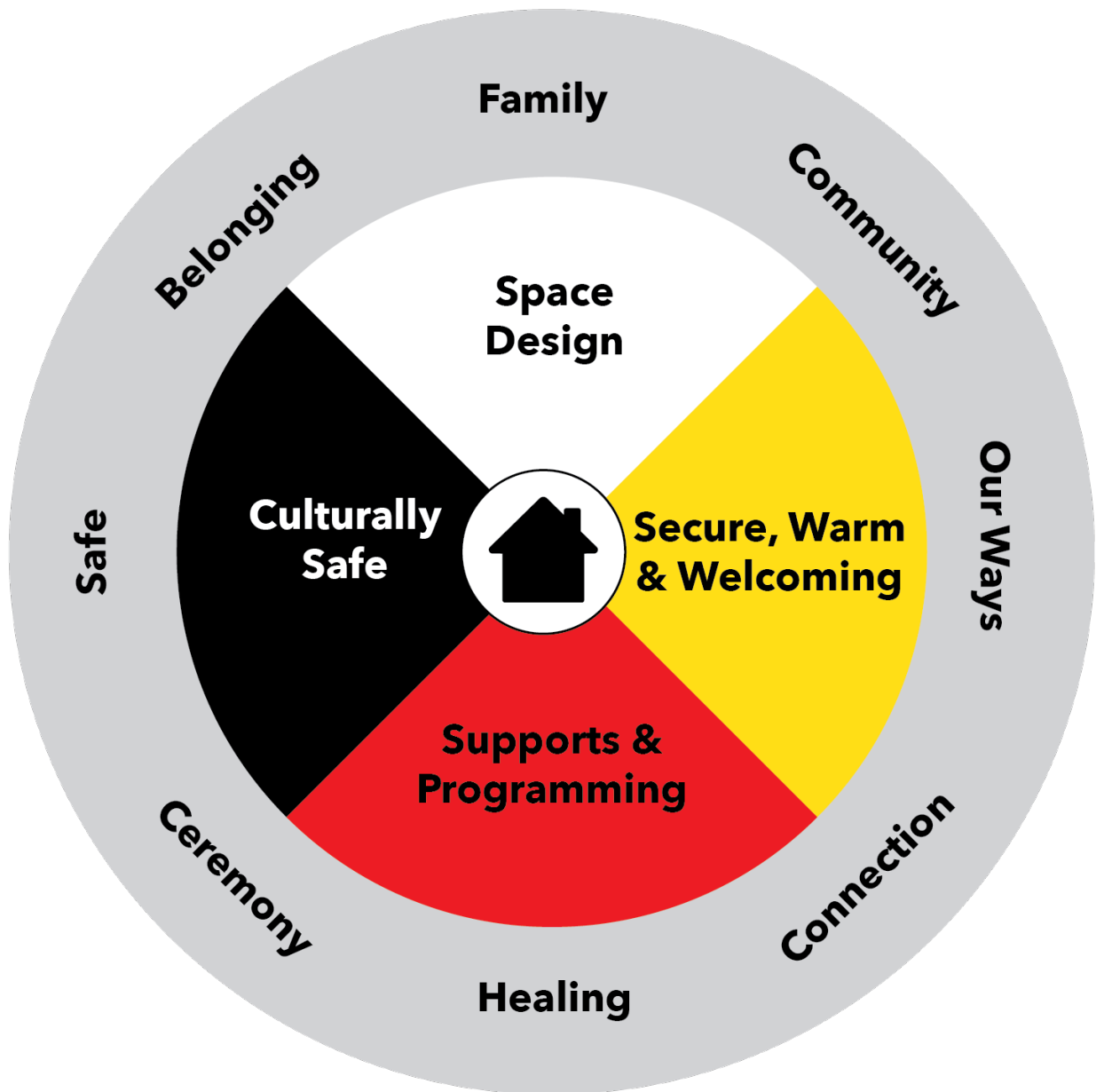
*Culturally safe housing **embraces & integrates** traditional ways. Availability of **supports are essential** in future Indigenous housing developments.*



# Indigenous Led Culturally Safe Housing:

## Interconnected Elements of a Holistic Approach

Our study highlighted that Indigenous housing is about holistic wellbeing. This medicine wheel image visually shows what we learned from our participants in this knowledge building project. Within a holistic worldview, housing is central and connected to all aspects of life.



# What do urban based Indigenous people in our communities think Indigenous housing should be?

Our participants shared a clear understanding of what is needed and the central role housing plays in holistic health. Below are their ideas about what culturally safe housing could look like in practice.

## Space Design

### Inside Spaces:

Own laundry	Wifi & cable
Secure storage	Accessible design
Pet friendly units	Shared kitchen
Family transition suite	Guest suite
Climate controlled building	Good sound proofing
Common area for activities	Good ventilation
Family mourning practices	

### Outside Spaces:

Fire pit area	Gardening space
Moose hide tanning area	Shared smoker
Kids play area	Parking lot security

## Secure, Warm & Welcoming

**Welcome package/gift** to orient new residents to the building and services, including youth.

**Warm, homely** unit design.

**Greenery** with trees, grass & little yards.

**Safe spaces** for families, women and children. Visible, enclosed play area, designated smoking area.

**Clear housing rules** including drug alcohol use.

**Inclusive housing community** where everyone is treated equally, including unbiased and stigma free culture.

**Fair & equitable process** for tenant selection.



## Culturally Safe

**Training** for all staff to understand Indigenous culture and how to work with tenants in creating safe environments.

**Involve residents** in sharing their knowledge of cultural activities, such as cooking.

**Integrate cultural ways** into the building process, such as long house design, totems, art & wood harvesting practices.

**Honor traditional ways**, such as bringing in elders, participating in land-based activities and using traditional mediation and dispute resolution ways.

**Trauma informed approach** to establish tenant & building rules (i.e. collective tenancy agreements).

**Cultivate a diverse community** through a mix of tenant incomes.

**Support creative ways** for tenants to contribute to housing and be successful so "no one is left behind", such as using a culturally safe approach to rent deficits where tenants can work off amount owing.

## Supports & Programs

**Resident counselor & wellness support**, including mental / physical check-ins, hygiene, harm reduction and support for single men and those with disabilities.

**Family supports**, such as child care, pregnancy outreach and counseling.

**Tenant support**, such as home repair course, rental rights & responsibilities, help paying bills, & finding housing in wider community.

**Cultural connection activities**, such as smudge, talking circles, and cooking.

**Kids and youth programming**, such as floor hockey, town outings, lending locker (i.e. skates, bikes, etc.).

**Support coordination access**, such as the Food Bank and supervised family visits.

**Connect tenants** to wider cultural activities happening in reserve communities.

# Indigenous culturally safe housing contributing to a **good life**

100 survey participants shared how safe and culturally supported Indigenous housing would contribute to a good life for them, their family, and their culture. Here are some of their stories.

*"Need a **safe home base** to build a future. If a person or family is safe, then they can thrive. No families are safe till all families are safe!"*

*"Gives you a sense of **stability**. When you have stability in the back of your mind you have **peace**. When you have housing sorted out you can move on with everything else. You're stuck when you don't have housing - can't move forward."*

*"Would help me and the wife make a safer environment for our **children**."*

*"Relaxed family atmosphere where cultural **connections**, learning, support, and family connections can be had."*

*"The word **stable** comes to mind."*

*"Wouldn't have to worry or stress. I would feel **happy**. I haven't been truly happy in years."*

*"There is **nothing better** than having your own safe space for you and your family."*

*"Safe affordable housing with supports would help with having a **stable environment** for my children and myself."*

*"We would be able to feel more connected to our **culture**."*

*"I would have a place to come back to after work that is **warm** and cook **meals**."*

*"It would be **peaceful**."*

*"Would get to know all my native **background** and teach others."*

*"**Slow down** on the alcohol and less stress."*

*"Would be so amazing to **teach** my baby the culture."*

*"**Cultural activities** can really pull you away from a lot of toxic things that could be going on in your life and it's a nice break."*

*"I would be a lot **happier** and **less stressed**."*

*"Just having a stable home would work wonders in bringing up my **son** and **future children**."*

*"My **children** would be able to **learn other cultures** as I have growing up. I was only located in my home town for a short period and not many teach off reserve to help to learn the culture."*



# A New Story for Indigenous Housing

Our study has shed light on the housing needs of urban based Indigenous residents living in Telkwa, Houston, Smithers, and surrounding areas and helps to fill an important local knowledge gap, providing a clear understanding of the unique housing challenges and needs experienced by urban based Indigenous residents.

Many of the stories witnessed in this study are heartbreaking, the knowledge shared lays bare the difficult truth that for many years Indigenous people in our communities have been deprived of basic human rights to shelter and adequate housing. This is happening in 2022 in the communities such as Smithers and Telkwa, which are seen by many as desirable, thriving and healthy.

Our study shows the root causes of housing challenges are historic, systemic and deeply connected with our shared colonial history. The deep traumas families have endured are interwoven with their ongoing housing insecurity.

The information collected and stories about hopes, dreams and solutions demonstrates the strength and resilience of Indigenous people in our communities and their collective wisdom of what is needed to create a new story for future generations.

A new story for Indigenous housing:

***Honouring the voices in this study & trusting Indigenous knowledge and approaches will allow a new story to begin, a story that supports intergenerational healing.***



## The Path Forward





## Contact Us

If you have questions relating to our study, please contact the Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre at:

**Phone:** (250) 847-5211

**Email:** [info@dzekant.com](mailto:info@dzekant.com)

1188 Main Street  
PO Box 2920  
Smithers, BC  
V0J 2N0

[www.dzekant.com/dze-l-kant-housing-society/](http://www.dzekant.com/dze-l-kant-housing-society/)