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INUIT TAPIRIIT KANATAMI

Youth Perspectives on Housing in Inuit Nunangat

About Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) is the national representational organization for Canada's 60,000 Inuit, the majority of whom live in four regions of Canada's Arctic, specifically, the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories), Nunavut, Nunavik (Northern Quebec), and Nunatsiavut (Northern Labrador). Collectively, these four regions make up Inuit Nunangat, our homeland in Canada. It includes 53 communities and encompasses roughly 35 percent of Canada's landmass and 50 percent of its coastline.

The comprehensive land claim agreements that have been settled in Inuit Nunangat continue to form a core component of our organization's mandate. These land claims have the status of protected treaties under section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, and we remain committed to working in partnership with the Crown toward their full implementation. Consistent with its founding purpose, ITK represents the rights and interests of Inuit at the national level through a democratic governance structure that represents all Inuit regions.

ITK advocates for policies, programs and services to address the social, cultural, political and environmental issues facing our people.

ITK is governed by a Board of Directors composed of the following members:

- Chair and CEO, Inuvialuit Regional Corporation
- President, Makivik Corporation
- President, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated
- President, Nunatsiavut Government

In addition to voting members, the following non-voting Permanent Participant Representatives also sit on the Board of Directors:

- President, Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada
- President, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada
- President, National Inuit Youth Council

Prepared for Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami by the International Institute for Sustainable Development

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Introduction

Adequate housing is essential for the development, health and well-being of children and youth. Many communities in Inuit Nunangat (the four Inuit regions of Canada: Nunavik, Nunatsiavut, Nunavut, and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region) face significant housing issues such as shortages resulting in overcrowding; insufficient heat and ventilation leading to mould; and high costs of maintenance and repairs. This impacts young people, resulting in higher rates of illnesses and domestic violence, and lower rates of education. Through a series of interviews and a review of key literature, this discussion paper outlines Inuit youth perspectives on the main housing challenges and opportunities, needs and expectations.

1. Context for Youth and Housing

Canada's Inuit population is the youngest in the country, with an average age of 23 compared to 40 years for non-Inuit Canadians. Of all Inuit regions, Nunavik and Nunavut have the highest proportion of children aged 14 and younger (40 per cent each), followed by the Inuvialuit region (27.8 per cent) and Nunatsiavut (24.7 per cent) (Statistics Canada, 2015). In Nunavut for example, nearly three quarters of the Inuit population are less than 40 years old (Nunavut Tourism, 2016). Access to affordable, high-quality housing is of vital importance to the health and well-being of all people, including Inuit youth. Throughout Inuit Canada there is a chronic lack of housing which is a major obstacle to economic development and stifles youth social mobility (Audla, 2013, p. 3).

The lack of housing leads to overcrowding in existing units, and it has been calculated that Inuit are 10 times more likely than non-Inuit to live in crowded homes (Gionet, 2006). Overcrowding affects Inuit youth by leading to increased levels of family violence, lower levels of educational attainment, as well as to hearing impairments, sleep deprivation, and depression (Audla, 2013, p. 2). Much of the housing stock available in Inuit Nunangat is often in poor condition. In 2010, 28 per cent of Inuit surveyed said that their housing units were in need of major repairs (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2010, p. 2). This causes health problems for Inuit youth. For example, a study released in 2013 found that in the Kitikmeot region of Nunavut, 40 per cent of Inuit children are hospitalized with respiratory tract infections linked to substandard housing (Audla, 2013, p. 4).

In addition, the lack of housing accessibility and suitability affects educational prospects of Inuit youth. There is a gap between the educational achievement of Inuit and non-Inuit Canadians (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2014, p. 26). In 2011, 67 per cent of Inuit aged 20-24 living in Inuit Nunangat had less than a high school diploma (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2014, p. 26), compared to 12.7 per cent for the rest of the country (Statistics Canada, 2015). That same year, the nationwide census found that only 1.9 per cent of Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat had a university degree, compared to 13 per cent of Inuit living in the rest of the country. One of the reasons for this gap is that children and youth have distinctive housing needs, such as a quiet place to study and do their homework, but these needs are often not met in the Inuit regions due to overcrowding.

Selected levels of educational attainment	Within Inuit Nunangat	Outside Inuit Nunangat ¹
	percentage	
Postsecondary qualifications	28.2	53.3
Trades certificate	12.4	15.5
College diploma	12.7	22.4
University certificate below bachelor ²	1.3	2.7
University degree	1.9	13.0

Figure 1: (Statistics Canada, 2015)

Housing availability is an important factor in a young person’s decision to pursue education. Many young people are not motivated to study. For example, up to 90 per cent of school students in Nunavik drop out of high school, and the lack of stable housing contributes to that (Parliament of Canada, 2016). Given the shortage of affordable housing, securing a housing unit is often a matter of competition. Public housing eligibility requirements that give more points to people with low-income jobs and people who give birth at a young age discourage them from continuing their education (Parliament of Canada, 2016). Educated young people often leave Nunavik communities because education does not “create enough points” to qualify them for their own social housing unit; there is no incentive for them to return to their communities (Parliament of Canada, 2016).

2. Viewpoint of Youth Regarding Housing Opportunities and Challenges for Future Generations

2.1 Accessibility

Most of the Inuit youth interviewed highlighted lack of access to affordable housing as a serious issue. It was stated that long waiting lists for housing, coupled with a lack of single units, result in large numbers of residents unable to access the housing they need. A direct result of this is overcrowded families, with at times up to 15 people in a four-bedroom house, high levels of homelessness and “couch surfing,” and people staying in abusive domestic situations to maintain shelter. Youth interviewees explained that accessibility issues are exacerbated by lack of land on which to build housing; complicated land ownership rules making it difficult to build on land; insufficient subsidies for single parents; and nepotism among board members and community members selected to receive social housing. Young people are sometimes seen as not eligible for housing in their own communities. In Nunavik, for example, most company housing is provided only to workers from outside the community, bypassing qualified local employees (Parliament of Canada, 2016).

Access to affordable housing could be improved in a number of ways. Above all, additional housing options are needed to address overcrowding issues. For example, subsidized private rentals may help increase access to housing in Inuit regions (Nunavut Housing Corporation, 2012, p. 27). As well, establishing safe houses for young people in each community may help provide safety from violence and space for studying (Parliament of Canada, 2016). To encourage educated young people to stay in their communities, Inuit youth leaders have recommended the creation of housing co-operatives – subsidized apartment complexes managed and run by eligible young people who would learn to live independently and responsibly (Parliament of Canada, 2016).

All youth representatives agreed that additional government support would be the best way to increase housing accessibility. Additionally, they suggested incentivizing education by creating a points system for housing allocation, where higher education levels gain more points. In Nunavik, youth leaders have suggested changing the outdated company policies that currently prioritize the housing needs of workers from outside the local communities. These suggestions may help ensure housing availability to qualified local residents (Parliament of Canada, 2016).

Future generations of Inuit youth will face similar issues in trying to improve access to affordable housing: many small communities are inaccessible by road, meaning that materials not available locally must be shipped in at great cost, for short building seasons. (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2008, p. 70). Further research is required in order to understand the risks and factors will affect housing accessibility in the future (Canadian Polar Commission, 2014, p. 6).

2.2 Link between Access to Housing and Physical and Mental Health

Youth representatives from across Inuit Nunangat emphasized that access to good quality housing is vital to promoting good physical and mental health.

The link between access to housing and physical and mental health could be reduced in Canada in a number of ways. Clearly, the most obvious ways are to build more properties to reduce overcrowding and improve housing quality to improve health (Minch, et al., 2011, p. 520). Inuit youth representatives also believe it vital that regular housing inspections be undertaken on properties to ensure that they are up to livable standards. Housing inspections must then be acted upon to improve the quality of housing, for example ensuring asbestos and lead paint are replaced. Both asbestos and lead paint are currently restricted but are still present in many houses in Inuit Nunangat and are known to cause illnesses such as lung cancer and anemia (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2016) (Health Links BC, 2015).

2.3 Building Design/Preference

All Inuit youth representatives who were interviewed emphasized that buildings must be better designed for Northern conditions. In many cases, houses have been built using southern designs which are not appropriate for Arctic winters. The result is units that have to be repaired

regularly, have mould and structural damage, and do not adequately protect their inhabitants from the elements.

As well as being built to withstand harsh winter conditions, northern houses must also be designed for traditional Inuit activities such as skinning animals and hosting large gatherings to eat (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2008, p. 78). There are a number of ways in which culturally appropriate designs can be achieved, including a summer and winter entrance for seasonal lifestyle; a large central open space for groups to eat together; a large tub for soaking animal skins; large porches to promote connection to the land; and cold rooms to keep meat and prepare skins (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2008, p. 78).

It was also stated by youth interviewees that houses should be built in a more energy efficient manner with better insulation, and consideration given to renewable energy sources. As climate change creates further issues related to permafrost melting, and inconsistent ice road access, the next generation of Inuit leaders will also face the challenge of how to create sustainable, energy efficient housing while taking into account the unique culture of Inuit.

2.4 Affordability

Youth representatives all stated that the high cost of living is one of the most significant issues affecting housing. High rent for working individuals, coupled with a high cost of living, leads to a scenario where it is almost impossible to become a homeowner (Tester F. , 2009, p. 139). This in turn forces Inuit to remain in social housing, thus severely limiting stock (Lauster & Tester, Homelessness and Health in the Crowded Canadian Arctic: Inuit Experiences, 2014, p. 91). Consequently, many Inuit youth leaders expressed concern that they would never be able to own a home of their own or would be forced to stay in overcrowded conditions. Affordability problems are exacerbated by the fact that many insurance companies do not adequately cover housing due to the severe climate. With cost of heating Inuit properties expected to continue to rise (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2008, p. 75), future generations will continue to face the challenge of reducing housing costs to increase accessibility to affordable housing.

Harsh conditions in the North mean that housing is likely to often need repairs; in 2012, 27 per cent of Inuit households required major repairs and were below adequacy standards (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2012, p. 4), and it has been estimated that the average cost of major repairs is as much as \$150,000 per unit (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2014, p. 22). The high cost of flying in labour and materials increases the cost of the badly needed construction work (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2008, p. 72). Inuit youth leaders commented that there are many cases of arrears due to lack of payments on maintenance.

Future generations of Inuit youth will have to find a way to keep repairing damaged housing stock in order to keep pace with demand (Canadian Polar Commission, 2014, p. 2). Climate change will pose a serious challenge as warmer temperatures will increase maintenance costs by melting permafrost and destabilizing buildings (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2008, p. 71). Additionally, higher temperatures will reduce the amount of time available to travel

on frozen roads, thus making transporting vital materials even more difficult (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2008, p. 72).

2.5 Sustainability

Climate change is a significant issue in the Arctic, with the region warming at a rate of almost twice the global average (World Wildlife Fund, 2016). Since Inuit live primarily in and around the Arctic, they have been described as the “human barometer of climate change” (Cecco, 2015). In Inuit Nunangat, climate change has resulted in an increase in hazardous conditions, including coastal erosion, permafrost thaw and ice instability (Pearce, et al., 2009, p. 11) (Nunavut Climate Change Centre). Lack of confidence in the ability to accurately predict the weather has also decreased the amount of knowledge sharing between generations, meaning that youth struggle to effectively carry on Inuit traditions (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2005, p. 72).

Since young people will be disproportionately affected by climate change, they are uniquely positioned to encourage the use of renewable energy, and to highlight the importance of energy efficiency and sustainability. Youth representatives emphasized that environmentally sustainable housing is extremely important, especially at a time where climate change is such a threat. At the same time, all noted that there has been a lack of focus on sustainability, and agreed that incorporating renewable energy would provide an opportunity to change this. Currently most properties rely on diesel for power generation, but there is enormous potential for transitioning to clean, alternative energy. It was noted that since many communities have 24 hours of sunshine per day in the summer there are opportunities for solar power, which would need to be supplemented by other forms of energy in the winter. Wind energy was also discussed, but it was mentioned that some residents have not been supportive due to potential issues related to visual impact and effect on migrating geese.

3. Conclusion

Inuit Nunangat faces many issues related to access to adequate housing. There is a severe shortage of units, and what does exist is often of poor quality, overpriced and/or overcrowded. Buildings are regularly not designed to withstand the northern climate, sustainability is often not incorporated into housing policy, climate change is creating even more housing challenges, and decisions are sometimes made without consulting communities, especially youth. As well as detailing these issues, the Inuit youth leaders interviewed emphasized the negative effects that the housing crisis is having on their lives. While housing issues affect many Inuit, the impacts are disproportionately felt by Inuit youth. There are a number of obvious ways in which youth access to housing can be improved, including by building more affordable, high-quality multi-unit housing; incorporating sustainability into housing policies; pioneering innovative housing solutions and financing options so more young professionals can become renters and homeowners.

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