

Urban Aboriginal People: Homes, Homelessness and Residential Mobility

This highlight describes the development of a survey instrument to study links between living arrangements, homelessness and residential mobility of urban Aboriginals. The survey methodology was based on respondents' recall of their moves.

INTRODUCTION

Migration to urban areas, residential mobility within those areas, and homelessness are important issues for Aboriginal people in Canada and for the general population. This pilot study provides information about how a survey methodology can be used to identify patterns of residential mobility among urban Aboriginal populations. The objectives of this pilot study were to design and pilot test such a survey methodology, not to carry out a survey that would support statistically significant inferences for Aboriginal populations in urban centres.

A questionnaire was developed and tested with a sample of 144 Aboriginal respondents living in two urban centres—Toronto (73) and Winnipeg (71). The sample included respondents from First Nations (96), Métis (40), Inuit (4). Fourteen Aboriginal organizations in the two selected cities identified and helped interview respondents, the majority of whom were women. Information was gathered between November, 1999 and January, 2000 using in-person interviews, telephone interviews and self-administered questionnaires.

ISSUES AND DESIGN

Two distinct sets of issues were addressed in the research. Substantive issues dealt with general topics such as residential migration and mobility, frequency and duration of homelessness, current and projected housing needs, and profiling socio-economic characteristics (gender, income, employment, education) of the study population. Survey design issues dealt with Aboriginal consultations, representative pre-testing, literacy and survey administration methods.

The methodology employed to design this survey included a scan of literature and existing research, consultations with experts and other researchers, and development of a conceptual framework of issues to guide the survey instrument design. A draft questionnaire was created and pre-tested in Toronto for terminology and sequencing prior to finalizing the survey instrument.

The emphasis was on developing mobility related questions. Other housing related questions have already been developed and proven in many previous surveys. Some of these were included in the pilot test because of concerns that they may not work in the same way for the minority Aboriginal culture as they do in the majority culture. A check for validity was in order.

Local Aboriginal organizations were supportive and participated in the survey administration. Respondents took an average of 35 minutes to complete the questionnaire. For the self-administered method of interview, respondents with good literacy levels were identified. The need to ensure sampling from middle and higher income Aboriginal individuals was reinforced. The section on Moves (Migration and Mobility) provided the greatest recall challenge for respondents.

The scan of literature and existing research focused on current housing situations, household characteristics and living arrangements, community and neighbourhood classifications (dwelling types, tenure), homelessness and reasons for moves. Principal sources of federal information were Statistics Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), Health Canada, and the reports of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP). Also included were various CMHC surveys and evaluations plus information from the Statistics Canada Census and 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS). The issue of special needs included disability and health for which the main data source was the Statistics Canada Health and Activity Limitations Survey (HALS), a post-census survey of the general Canadian population.

SURVEY RESULT

This survey instrument was designed to answer four main research questions. While, the results of the pilot test are not representative of all urban Aboriginal people, overall the pilot demonstrated that the instrument can provide data suitable for answering the questions.

Research Question #1: What are the patterns of residential mobility of urban Aboriginal households, including episodes of homelessness?

The pilot study provided a successful test of survey methodology used to identify patterns of residential mobility and demonstrated that details of past moves can be tracked, within limits. The survey tracked up to three moves within a five year time period based on respondent recall. Field team reports indicate this horizon may be the practical limit of accurate recall.

Based on the responses of the non-representative test sample:

- Average length of residence was 71 months for homeowners, 32 for renters.
- Twenty-three per cent of respondents had not moved in the past five years, another 23 per cent moved once, 17 per cent twice, 12 per cent three times, 10 per cent four times, 6 per cent five times and 9 per cent had moved 6 or more times.
- Twenty-six percent of moving respondents moved within the last 6 months, 42 per cent within the last 12 months and 58 per cent within last 24 months.
- Six respondents (4 per cent) had at least one episode of homelessness between moves, the episode varying between one and thirteen weeks.
- Of those who had moved, 80 per cent moved at least once within their city, 38 per cent reported at least one move to their city. (Some respondents had both types of move).
- Of those who had moved once in the five year period, 27 per cent had done so in the last 6 months, 42 per cent in the last 12 months and 63 per cent in the last 24 months.
- Of those who had moved twice in the five year period, 19 per cent had made the earlier move in the last 12 months, and 48 per cent in the last 24 months.
- Of those who had moved three times in the five year period, 3 per cent had made the earliest move in the last 12 months, and 33 per cent in the last 24 months.

Some data quality problems were associated with questions such as changes in household type and size. There were no non-response problems but, to reduce the risk of data quality errors, the pilot survey collected qualitative data to complement closed-category responses. This approach was very useful for understanding intent when respondents used their own words to describe situations and events. The following are four concepts that respondents interpreted differently and that require caution in the design of future surveys.

Household - the concept of the household, as well as derived concepts such as household type and size, were subject to wide interpretations by respondents. Variations were related to the inclusion or exclusion of extended family members. Respondents qualitatively defined roles and relationships among individual household members and simple counts worked best to characterize households quantitatively (e.g. two adults rather than “a couple”). Almost half of all households (46 per cent) included only one adult.

Sharing a residence - the wide variation in types of accommodation sharing (stable, full-time family living arrangements, short-term stays by friends or relatives), indicated that the shared designation alone does not capture living arrangements. The concept of shared residence is linked to the concept of household; a respondent who considers an extended family to be a single household does not consider that residence shared. One-quarter (25 per cent) of respondents said they do share their residence.

Regular place to stay - the results of the survey pre-test, conducted prior to the full pilot survey, indicated that the phrase “without a regular place to stay” best identified episodes of homelessness. Some respondents considered that someone else’s residence, a temporary shelter, or even a regular spot outdoors qualified as a “regular place to stay”.

Homelessness is a distinct research subject that requires further work and a separate approach from the one used in this pilot survey. Although this methodology can identify episodes of homelessness, it is not appropriate for surveying people for whom homelessness may be more chronic. Preliminary findings indicate that respondents who have had episodes of homelessness are willing to talk about their housing problems in structured interviews.

Research Question #2: What are the determinants of mobility, with a focus on housing-related determinants?

The pilot survey explored the reasons and motivations behind the moves of Aboriginal people living in urban areas—what some experts characterize as “push” and “pull” factors. While very preliminary, the pilot survey results were broadly similar to the results of the 1991 APS which showed that family, employment, housing and education are the major reasons for moving.

The pilot survey also successfully identified reasons for moves, using questions or probes to identify different types of housing-related reasons for moves. Reasons differ for in-city (mobility) versus to-city (migration) moves. Housing was a bigger factor for in-city moves while work and education were more important for people moving across city boundaries.

The pilot survey explored in some detail housing-related reasons for moving such as affordability, better quality, and housing that better suits household needs. Cumulatively, these different housing-related factors were identified by almost two-thirds of respondents as underlying their most recent move. This is much higher than the percentage of respondents to the APS who identified housing as a factor in either migration or mobility.

Ten percent of respondents used their residence for employment activity while 17 per cent of households have someone with a long-term disability or handicap.

Research Question #3: What are the housing circumstances at each stage of the mobility itinerary?

Within the three move, five year limit, the pilot survey was successful in collecting respondent data about household and dwelling characteristics at different stages of their mobility itinerary. Again, data quality problems were related to different understandings of key concepts such as household and residence sharing. However, the open-ended questions provided a valuable qualitative complement to the quantitative data from closed-end questions.

The survey asked how respondents found their new residence for each of the three moves. Respondent recall was very good with Aboriginal organizations having an important role in locating the residence in the most recent move (21 per cent) versus more distant moves (5-6 per cent). Family members and newspapers were less important sources in the most recent than in previous moves. Friends were an important information source in all moves (21-30 per cent).

CONCLUSION

The objectives of this research were solely to design and test a survey methodology for addressing questions about residential mobility among urban Aboriginal peoples. Other observations and experiences with the survey methodology are that:

- Working with local Aboriginal organizations was very successful in terms of their contribution to the pre-test draft, identification of contacts and provision of facilities for conducting interviews.
- An Aboriginal field team enhanced respondents' participation, comfort and candour.
- While the three questionnaire methods used—in-person, telephone, self-administered—worked, collecting detailed data or concept-based responses may best be accomplished with direct interviewer contact, particularly with lower levels of literacy.
- Asking both closed-ended and open-ended questions provided complementary information and would be a useful research strategy in future surveys.

This research tested recall for up to three moves in the past five years and field work indicates these are reasonable and practical limits. Without clear instructions, questions can be confusing but the mobility itinerary format does work within this time horizon. Increasing the thresholds would jeopardize data quality.

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