

# WHAT IS MEASURED DEFINES THE CRISIS

Using community-based housing metrics to create culturally appropriate housing in Nishnawbe Aski Nation

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## SUMMARY

To address the ongoing housing crisis in their territory, Nishnawbe Aski Nation is creating a housing strategy based on community values and priorities. A cornerstone of this strategy is the creation of self-determined local indicators, which retreat from standardized metrics, and strictly physical understandings of home. Instead, metrics are focused on the diverse lived experiences of community members and the intersections of housing with mental, physical, spiritual and emotional well-being. By creating this deeper, more contextual understanding of housing priorities each of the 49 member First Nations of Nishnawbe Aski Nation will be able to better plan for the future.

## RÉSUMÉ

Pour résoudre la crise permanente du logement qui sévit sur son territoire, la Nation Nishnawbe Aski Nation élabore une stratégie de logement qui repose sur les valeurs et les priorités communautaires. Une des pierres angulaires de cette stratégie est la création d'indicateurs locaux autodéterminés qui s'éloignent des facteurs normalisés et des concepts purement physiques de ce qu'est une habitation. En guise de remplacement, on propose des facteurs basés sur l'expérience vécue des membres de la collectivité et des lieux de convergence du logement et du bien-être mental, physique, spirituel et émotif. En dégagant cette compréhension plus profonde et plus contextuelle des priorités de logement, chacun des 49 membres de la Première Nation pourra envisager un avenir meilleur.

Canada's first National Housing Strategy, released in 2018, identified Indigenous housing as a priority issue, and Indigenous people as a priority vulnerable group. The chapter of the National Housing Strategy focused on Indigenous people, "Nothing About Us, Without Us", confirmed that a distinctions-based National First Nations Housing Strategy would be developed "to ensure the future of housing and infrastructure reform is envisioned from a First Nations perspective."<sup>1</sup> The self-determination goal of this additional strategy, still incomplete, would be to "support First Nations care, control, and management of housing and infrastructure and address the needs of First Nations people living both on and off reserve,"<sup>2</sup> fitting within the strategy's target of removing 530,000 people from housing need.

Months later, in June 2018, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) Chiefs-in-Assembly declared a collective housing crisis and mandated the creation of a modern NAN Housing Strategy (the Strategy). The Strategy's objective, outlined in the resolution, is to "define housing need in NAN First Nations based on community values and priorities, and to advocate for unique community-based solutions."<sup>3</sup> This mandate came as a direct result of ongoing federal-level housing program failures which have "not met immediate need, have not addressed

future need, and have not promoted or created wellness” in NAN communities.<sup>4</sup>

Both strategies have two critical underlying questions. What is housing need? How can this need be addressed?

### CONTEXT

NAN is a Political Territorial Organization with 49 member First Nations in Northern Ontario. NAN’s territory covers more than 210,000 square miles (**Figure 1**) and the majority of NAN members live in First Nations that are only accessible by air or by winter roads. Using Canada’s standard metrics of suitability and adequacy, the outcomes for NAN’s on-reserve members are more than four and seven times worse than Canadian averages respectively.<sup>5</sup> Subject to higher rates of crowding and need for repairs, distinct inequities have existed for decades, with little improvement.<sup>6</sup>

The call for a NAN-specific housing strategy, rooted in community values and goals, represents a turn towards grassroots housing solutions. The creation of the NAN Housing Strategy, jointly undertaken by NAN and Together Design Lab at Ryerson University, looks to place the experiences and knowledge of NAN community members at the centre of the Strategy. Recognition is given to NAN’s unique context, and the climates, geographies, and cultures across the region and within individual First Nations, which shape both housing needs and goals.

### FOCUS ON METRICS

The Strategy’s approach to housing need breaks from the current standard measurement of housing, known as “Core Housing Need.” Since its inception in 1981, Core Housing Need has been used as a benchmark of minimally acceptable housing across Canada. Developed jointly with the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, the metric was designed to represent the modern urban concerns of housing in North America, while creating a framework for cross-jurisdictional comparisons to identify targets for housing interventions.<sup>7</sup>

Core Housing Need defines those Canadian populations most in need, creating a public policy objective while being a measurement tool for the efficacy of intervention. However, government defined metrics can delimit the potential for transformative change.<sup>8</sup>



With policy rooted in Core Housing Need, interventions are targeting a goal that is not decided by First Nation communities, but by an urban standard. The need being addressed is not the need referred to in the NAN Chiefs-in-Assembly declaration of housing emergency, but instead one defined by the Canadian government.

The Strategy is creating a new set of regional and local metrics to ensure that community values and priorities are clearly understood and can be integrated into the creation of future housing policies, programs and initiatives. Need will be redefined through the lived experiences of community members, ensuring that interventions target their priorities. Once created, NAN and community-specific metrics can guide a planning process of collecting baseline data, identifying community goals, and creating actions plans. The usefulness of need metrics in this scenario are derived not from their usefulness in national or international comparison, but in their relevance to occupants and assertion of self-determination in the community planning process.

### CREATING METRICS

Beginning in January 2019, members of NAN’s Housing and Infrastructure Department and Together Design Lab began meeting with representatives of NAN communities at regional NAN events, including NAN Health Summit, NAN Youth Gathering, and the NAN Environment, Climate Change & Housing Symposium. Sessions focused on understanding the professional perspectives of community representatives on existing housing issues, identifying populations facing

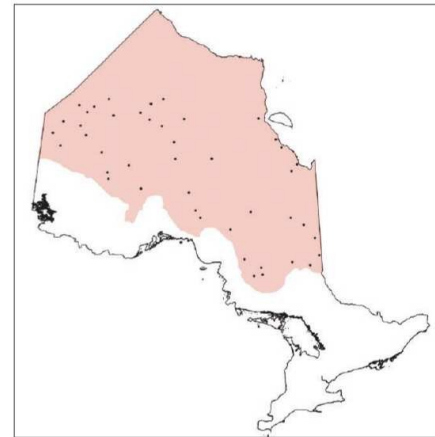


Figure 1. NAN Territory in red. Each dot represents a member First Nation.

greater housing need and their visions for the future of housing in their community, and examples of solutions to housing challenges which may already exist in communities. In June and July 2019, the Strategy team visited six communities to host similar workshops, learning directly from the experiences of community members in remote and drive-in communities of: Brunswick House, Fort Severn, Kasabonika Lake, Mattagami, Marten Falls and Cat Lake First Nations.

In advance of workshops, and in preparation for the co-creation process, an outline of guidelines for metric creation was developed by the Strategy team. The primary objective of the guidelines was to encourage workshop participants to focus on specificity to gather detailed and distinct information across different gender and age groups, without imposing disciplinary or technical understandings of home. These guidelines were the following:

1. Housing should be measured at the individual level where possible.
2. Housing is more than a physical structure, so it should be evaluated on more than its physical components.
3. Housing metrics should reflect local understandings and priorities in housing.
4. Different people may have different housing priorities; where possible all should be accounted for.

**TOWARDS METRICS:**

**CURRENT PROJECT LEARNINGS**

Understandings of housing have not been limited to physical or technical measures. More than 250 community members have participated to date and have described critical elements of the housing crisis as well-being, community growth, housing design, access to services, and environmental conditions. These elements are not experienced or discussed as discrete issues, but instead as part of an interconnected systems that must be addressed holistically.

Metrics are being developed within each of the above-mentioned themes. While some metrics are rooted in concerns shared across communities, others arise from specific situations. Metrics being created can be organized into three domains: physical characteristics, occupant satisfaction, and lived experience. Physical characteristics often rely on technical standards measuring the safety, quality, and durability of homes. Occupant satisfaction measures the ability of the home to meet the needs of each occupant, measuring whether spaces in and around the home are appropriately designed to satisfy the lifestyle requirements of individuals. Lived experience measures the social, emotional, and spiritual outcomes of occupants as a result of housing systems and broader community infrastructure. Measures include more appropriate understandings of access to services, housing’s role in forced mobility and a more comprehensive look at housing cost and insecurity.

The profile of housing being created by community-based metrics speaks to a more integrated and holistic understanding of home. Ending NAN’s housing crisis, as defined by NAN members, will require solutions which address the physical conditions of a home as well as community infrastructure, access to services, climate

change, and more. Housing programs must be designed to meet the specific needs of each community to address the well-being of each community’s members.

**CONCLUSION**

While core housing need has had a static and universal definition for nearly four decades in Canada, it is inappropriate in the context of First Nations housing policy. While programs may be tailored to the distinctions of First Nations, without control over goals, housing solutions remain rooted in colonial frameworks. Creating meaningful transformation in housing systems requires a shift in scale from the universal to the local. The creation of new metrics alone is insufficient to create change in the lived environment of occupants.

The effectiveness of new metrics relies on their operationalization in public policy. Creating change in the lived experience of NAN members relies on this more holistic understanding of home being the foundation of housing policy and First Nations self-determination throughout the housing system. While the metrics that will be developed are specific to the NAN territory, many of the project learnings can be applied to the development of tailored housing solutions for marginalized communities more broadly including the following:

1. Universal metrics do not capture the experiences of those most marginalized in housing systems including Indigenous peoples. Co-creating specific metrics rooted in the values, goals, and aspirations of a target population will ensure that programs are linked to the target population while providing a deeper understanding of existing barriers.
2. Non-standard and qualitative metrics can provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of housing need and will provide context for discussions of housing need.
3. The development of metrics alone is insufficient. The co-creation of metrics must be followed by a process of program development which allows the target community to have power in building the pathway towards success.
4. Co-development processes must be operationalized long-term. One-off metric development or strategies further

disempower and marginalize communities by tokenizing their participation and not supporting long-term change.

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**ENDNOTES**

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- <sup>2</sup> Canada, Employment and Social Development Canada, “Canada’s National Housing Strategy.”
- <sup>3</sup> Chiefs-in-Assembly Resolution 18/18 (June 5, 2018)
- <sup>4</sup> Chiefs-in-Assembly Resolution 18/18.
- <sup>5</sup> Nishnawbe Aski Nation and Together Design Lab, “Nishnawbe Aski Nation response to the First Nations National Housing and Infrastructure Strategy,” 2018. Retrieved from [http://www.nan.on.ca/upload/documents/nan-housing\\_position\\_paper-final.pdf](http://www.nan.on.ca/upload/documents/nan-housing_position_paper-final.pdf)
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- <sup>7</sup> Paul Burke, Connie Casey and Gerd Doepner, “Housing Affordability Problems and Housing Need in Canada and the United States: A comparative study,” (Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation).
- <sup>8</sup> D. Salée, C. Lévesque and D. Newhouse, “Quality of life of Aboriginal people in Canada: An analysis of current research.” *IRRP Choices* 12, No. 6 (2006). ■