



# QUESTIONING RESEARCH I:

SECOND BC/YUKON FORUM  
ON HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH

FORUM REPORT

MARCH 2008

# Questioning Research I:

Second BC/Yukon Forum on  
Homelessness Research

Forum Report



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## Introduction

*The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research. The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity.*

-- Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*

Over 150 people from across BC and the Yukon attended *Questioning Research: The Second BC/Yukon Aboriginal Forum on Homelessness Research* held in November, 2006 at the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre in Coast Salish Territory. The day long forum involved discussion and presentations on the meaning of homelessness research to Aboriginal peoples from a wide variety of perspectives from pro to con, from enthusiastic to cautious, and from joyful to grieving.

Regardless of their perspective, participants shared a fierce commitment to the development of solutions to a crisis of homelessness that has devastated many lives in the Aboriginal community and has gone unrecognized for too long. It has been well known for some time that Aboriginal people are over-represented in homelessness statistics and that discussions about this phenomenon are decidedly under-represented in the mountains of research produced regularly on homelessness issues.

The forum was intended to begin to address this disparity by articulating the unique issues involved in developing partnerships between the Aboriginal community and research organizations. This report is intended to capture the flavour of the discussions that took place during the forum. It is meant as a starting point for an ongoing discussion about the role of research in supporting community solutions to homelessness. It includes:

- 
- A summary of presentations and panel reports
  - Results of discussion groups
  - Summary of recommendations developed during this process

One critical lesson is that there remains a great deal of mistrust among community members about the value of research. For too long the benefits of research have disproportionately gone to researcher and institutions while communities have waited to see full benefits from their involvement in research processes. At the forum participants learned of promising developments that may turn traditional approaches on their head by supporting research processes based on participation and respect. “We are moving from research ‘on’ Aboriginal people to research ‘with’ and ‘by’ Aboriginal people,” said keynote speaker, Rod McCormick of the UBC Faculty of Education.

Another lesson closely related to the first is the need for the development and refinement of community based approaches that support the creation of community solutions to community problems. Research without action is not only ineffective. It is seen by many as immoral given the circumstances of many communities struggling with issues such as entrenched poverty and homelessness. Research on homelessness issues must take into account the experience, hopes and dreams of members of Aboriginal communities.

Some speakers expressed anger that research resources (including those directed at the forum) were not being allocated to address immediate community needs. The discussion articulated the difference between short and long term solutions to homelessness and the need for research dollars to be utilized effectively and to support the creation of solutions to community problems.

Despite the many legitimate misgivings about research, participants also learned that research is being used to frame policy discussions and decisions by governments at all levels. Some speakers cautioned that those who refuse to participate in research run the risk of being excluded from policy discussions and decisions.

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This report does not provide the answers to all these questions, but it is hoped it can contribute to the discussions around these critical issues.

### **Who organized the forum?**

The forum was organized by the Native Education Centre and SPARC BC (Social Planning and Research Council of BC) working in partnership with a steering committee comprised of members from the Aboriginal Research Advisory Subcommittee of the BC/Yukon Regional Homelessness Research Committee.

#### **Keynote Speaker – Dr. Rod McCormick**

Dr. Rod McCormick, a member of the Mohawk Nation and Associate Professor in the Department of Education and Counseling Psychology, gave a keynote address on the evening before the forum. Having been quite involved in Aboriginal health research projects over the years, he was able to give some insight into how the relationship between Aboriginal people and research has changed over the years.

Aboriginal research had transformed significantly in the last ten years. At first, it was research done *on* Aboriginal people, into what was “wrong” with us. Then, it became research done *for* Aboriginal people, and then research done *with* Aboriginal people. Now, it had become research done *by* Aboriginal people. With the creation of institutions such as ACADRE (Aboriginal Capacity and Developmental Research Environment), Aboriginal communities were taking charge of the research process, applying for funding and hiring their own Aboriginal researchers.

Mistrust of research in general was also declining. Many Aboriginal communities had been affected by what they nicknamed, “random acts of research”, or “drive-by research”. This was indicative of a power imbalance between Aboriginal communities and academic researchers, with universities having too much of a decision-making role in the process. Dr. McCormick argued that this was rapidly changing. Aboriginal communities were now having a great deal of say in research projects, with the creation of Aboriginal review boards, research guidelines, and knowledge transfer projects.

The OCAP principles – Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession – represent one way in which research has changed. Symbolizing a new level of self-determination and cultural preservation, these guidelines mean that a community can make decisions regarding why, how and by whom information is collected, used and shared for research, evaluation and planning purposes. Similarly, the “4 R’s”, which stand for Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility, also represent a greater level of control for Aboriginal peoples over research. Dr. McCormick said that many research funding bodies now have strict guidelines requiring high levels of decision-making power and involvement from Aboriginal communities in research.

Dr. McCormick closed with some words from Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the Maori researcher who wrote *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, about the values underlying research. Smith argues that before research projects are planned, some simple questions need to be asked about what sort of a difference the research will make, and why it is being done. Ultimately, respect, generosity and genuineness are among the most important values that a researcher can have. Smith’s perspective continues to provide guidance for Indigenous researchers around the world.



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## Plenary Discussion 1: Who, and What, is Research For?

### Panel members:

- Daniel Hill, Native Education Centre (Moderator)
- John Makson, First Nations Statistical Institute
- Cheryl Mathew, Centre for Native Policy and Research
- Janice Abbot, Atira Women's Resource Society
- Jody Stuart, A Place to Call My Own, Prince George

### Summary

The first plenary discussion focused on the perceived value of research in addressing the critical issues facing Aboriginal communities. The discussion focused on the question of whether research is a useful tool for building understanding or a means to divert attention and resources from the development of real solutions.

The arguments against research focused on the lack of tangible outcomes and the chasm between the research "industry" and the people who were the subjects of research. On the other hand, research proponents pointed out its value as a tool of decolonization, arguing that if properly carried out, research could be an empowering process that gives voice to Aboriginal issues and concerns. This can be especially important in the decision making and policy development process.

Specific discussion topics included:

- What is the value of research in helping Aboriginal peoples to end homelessness?
- Why should people be concerned about statistics?
- What are the ways in which Aboriginal communities can take ownership of research?

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## **What is the value of research in helping Aboriginal peoples to end homelessness?**

Some panelists emphasized that properly conducted research can be an important tool in the process of decolonization. Research can be used by Aboriginal peoples to “tell their own stories” and contribute to a greater understanding of Aboriginal issues and perspectives.

For example, Cheryl Mathew, argued that Aboriginal-led research meant that Indigenous peoples would be telling their own stories, asking their own questions and finding out the answers for themselves – whereas in the past, these things had been done *for* and *to* Aboriginal peoples. “We’re asking the questions, not someone else. We’re in control, and answering them for ourselves,” she said. “As Indigenous peoples it’s integral to write our own stories. Before, they were written for us.”

John Makson also spoke about the positive benefits of research. He noted that research is evolving from a passive process and is becoming an active, community-owned process. Used correctly, research tools could make Aboriginal peoples “count” and this would have significant implications in the creation of policies and allocation of resources. Efforts needed to be made to motivate the exploration of statistical tools and organize around subject matter, so that research could be relevant and measurable.

Other panelists argued that research has little value in supporting social change. Janice Abbot, of the Atira Women’s Resource Society, noted that, as a representative of a front-line service agency, she had not yet seen a research project that had translated into anything that really mattered to the women she works with. Research had not resulted in new housing or detox beds, or fewer women being harmed. In essence, the issue was in how many more people would be off the streets if the resources poured into research had been actually been allocated to housing and service delivery. Abbott maintained that the issue of homelessness is not particularly complicated, that it happens because people do not have homes.

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Jodi Stuart, a qualitative researcher from Prince George pointed out that the impacts of research were complex, and could at times be unpredictable. “I’ve seen it do great good, but I’ve also seen it do terrible harm,” she said arguing that in its worst incarnations, research may reinforce a perspective that blames the victim and masks the discussion about social responsibility for personal crises.

Research can also lead to a potentially exploitative power imbalance if it does nothing to improve the lives of the people who are sharing their most painful experiences

However, Stuart’s most recent project, which examined the links between homelessness and sexual exploitation, helped her to see that research had the power to transform people’s lives for the better. This was especially true if research projects worked to incorporate the experience of the research subjects into research design and methodology, she said.

Research has to be carried out with an end in mind, said Stuart. “If you cannot foresee some sort of improvement in the lives of people you are working with, then the research is not useful. It must bring something different to people’s lives.” One of the most valuable effects of the project was a fundamental shift in participant’s perceptions of themselves, from “outsiders”, to people with worthwhile stories and experiences.

Research can take an issue such as homelessness, which makes people feel overwhelmed and disempowered, and unravel it in a way that offers tangible ways of addressing the problems, making social change something which is within people’s grasp. Stuart said that homelessness was not the absence of shelter but the absence of “home”, a place where people belonged and were cared for. Although her work might not create housing, it could create tools to advocate for housing and develop and empower communities, thus creating a certain level of kinship between individuals.

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## **Why should people be concerned about statistics?**

“They’re out there, and they’re being used,” said John Makson, representing the First Nations Statistical Institute. Although statistics, with their focus on “head counts” and “surveillance, have a bad reputation as a colonial institution they cannot simply be ignored. They are the primary source of rationale and justification for program and policy development and decision making. Census data, for example, is used to develop fiscal formulas that decide how financial resources will be allocated. Makson argued that Aboriginal knowledge of statistics and the ways in which they are interpreted can be a powerful, empowering process. If used properly statistics can be a useful tool for supporting positive change by articulating Aboriginal issues and concerns in a format that can influence the decision making process.

For example, one current challenge is the under-representation of homeless people in the national census due to the fact that many people without a permanent address are missed by census workers. Since census data is used extensively by governments in decision making and resource allocation this is a critical gap, he said. Makson reported that the First Nations Statistical Institute was currently involved in a project to develop a methodological “snapshot” of homelessness that could be incorporated into census data and thus draw attention to the need for more concrete figures.

Underlying this is the reality that without participation in the census, there will be no representation in the data that is released about the census. It is easier for governments and other decision makers to avoid taking responsibility if the population does not officially “exist” in the data.

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## **What are the ways in which Aboriginal communities can take ownership of research?**

Panelists discussed the OCAP principles (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) and participatory action research, and their application to Aboriginal-led research projects.

The concept of OCAP developed in the late 1990s within the context of a First Nations health project in Canada. Over the years it has been recognized that the concept is relevant to Inuit, Metis and other Indigenous Peoples internationally.

Panelists stated that the OCAP principles were a step in the right direction, especially with regard to articulating the right to access information which has been generated.

Some panelists suggested there was a need for caution in adopting the OCAP principles. Concepts such as “ownership”, “possession”, and “control” were not a prominent part of traditional cultures based on communal principles, said Cheryl Mathew. “Our people didn’t ‘possess’ land in the way it is talked about in Western civilization. ‘Ownership’, we really didn’t do that either. Certain groups did, but, generally, ownership was thought of in a collective sense. ”

While she agreed that information must be owned by Aboriginal peoples, Mathew argued that the discussion could be more focused on the needs of the community.

“We’re exchanging information, getting something out of it. We’re not ‘owning’ it,” she said.



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### *Participatory Action Research*

Participatory action research addresses the power imbalance between researcher and research subject, by creating an equal partnership from the beginning. This partnership puts the research subject in both positions, according to panelist Jody Stuart.

Stuart spoke about a recent participatory action research project she had been involved in, which looked at the links between sexual exploitation and homelessness. The first step of the project was to approach six young women from the community to see if they wanted to create collaborative projects. The women then became part of a team that developed the project, wrote the proposal, designed the research questions, conducted the research, carried out the final analysis, presentation and dissemination, and continue to be involved in the project. An important component of the project was the continuing relationships between the women and the researchers: “If you’re going to open the door, you should be prepared to deal with the results. You need to stay and have a level of responsibility.”

Fundamentally, participatory research creates an equal partnership with equal voices, where the traditional power imbalances are set aside. To support the process, Stuart felt that researchers should realize that they do not have “all the answers”, and instead place themselves in a position of learning. The reason research seemed to be exploitative was because some researchers do not have enough humility, and do not realize that their training is only one framework among many other equally valuable frameworks. Stuart also conceded that the requirements for most funding proposals did not allow for a non-traditional approach to research – participatory approaches called for less rigidity in the articulation of outcomes at the outset.

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## Plenary Discussion 2: Four Case Studies of Research Projects Involving Aboriginal People

### **Panel members:**

- Laurie Gilchrist, Aboriginal Street Youth in Vancouver, Winnipeg and Montreal
- Deb Sider, A Sociological Analysis of Root Causes of Aboriginal Homelessness in Sioux Lookout, Ontario
- Mike Kramer, Room to Grow: A Made-in-Yukon Model of Service for Homeless Youth
- Suzanne Noel, Greater Vancouver Regional District Homeless Count 2005 (Presenter and Moderator)

### *Aboriginal Street Youth in Vancouver, Winnipeg and Montreal Laurie Gilchrist*

Laurie Gilchrist gave an overview of her research project on Aboriginal street youth in Vancouver, Winnipeg and Montreal, which had aimed to give youths a chance to tell their own stories of life on the street. Her presentation included reflections on her project, on being an Aboriginal researcher, and on the Aboriginal homelessness crisis.

Gilchrist explained that, when asked by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People to carry forth the project, she was at first very wary. "I did not want to bother these people with more research. I did not agree with useless, irrelevant research," she reflected. However, Gilchrist overcame her original qualms when the RCAP agreed to let her develop a research project that would give youths the opportunity to tell their own stories about the conditions on the streets and how they got there. The project, which was a collection of many stories, revealed themes of survival from racism and violence, and the failure of institutions to keep people safe.

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Gilchrist then gave an overview of the growing threat of homelessness for many Aboriginal people. Pointing out that Aboriginal peoples were always more at-risk, Gilchrist argued that they were consistently at the bottom priority for daycares shelters, and food banks. She quoted statistics reporting that homelessness among Aboriginal peoples was 3 times higher than other populations. However, although the situation may seem hopeless, Gilchrist urged participants to plan more proactively for the next generations and plan for more programs, more spirituality, and more research.

***Greater Vancouver Regional District Homeless Count 2005***  
***Suzanne Noel***

Questions were raised after the GVRD's Homeless Count in 2002 about the lack of Aboriginal representation. In 2005, the Greater Vancouver Regional District re-examined their methodology and advocated for a more inclusive Aboriginal component. They explored the question of why Aboriginal peoples were not being captured in the count, and what could be done to change this. Finally, they realized that Aboriginal peoples were not being included because the volunteers doing the counting were non-Aboriginal – they were not aware of cultural protocols, and did not know where Aboriginal peoples would congregate.

To address these issues the 2005 Homeless Count involved Aboriginal youth and street people to help with the questionnaire. After having received proper training, 20 teams of 2 went out to do the count. Giving gifts to everyone who contributed, the teams counted their friends, relations, their own community, and each other. The response was overwhelming. Many youths took on additional tasks because they believed in what they were doing. As a result, double the numbers were counted in 2005 as in 2002, and much of this was due to the Aboriginal-specific homeless count.

The most important lesson learned from the experience, according to Suzanne Noel, was that the people “in the know” should be doing the counting. This initiative reaffirmed the importance of research, by and

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for Aboriginal peoples. With the lack of trust between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, a great deal of work needed to be done to overcome this barrier, and respectful protocols were essential in the process. There had to be a thorough awareness of the culture and the protocols. “Always ask the communities, and always acknowledge the culture of the place you’re from,” said Noel.

***A Sociological Analysis of Root Causes of Aboriginal Homelessness in  
Sioux Lookout, Ontario***  
***Deb Sider***

Deb Sider’s research project was commissioned by the Sioux Lookout Homelessness Committee in an effort to understand why 99% of homeless people in the community were Aboriginal. According to local Elders and community leaders, the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal peoples was the direct result of residential school abuse and displacement from the land. This project aimed to examine this hypothesis.

The project identified risk factors which included: lack of affordable housing; poverty and low income; mental health issues; addictions and substance abuse; and domestic violence. Research participants also disclosed histories of: violence and abuse; childhood sexual abuse; mental health issues; addictions; housing shortages; and releases from jail as other factors contributing to homelessness. The project found Aboriginal peoples situated in historical social processes that produced inequalities leading to homelessness.

The recommendations that were developed as a result of the research centered upon taking action to systematically address the causes of Aboriginal homelessness. Already, a new Transition Support Program had been created. Sider’s report stressed the importance of listening and valuing the voices of the people most affected.

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*Room to Grow: A Made-in-Yukon Model of Service for Homeless Youth*  
Mike Kramer

Room to Grow was a collaborative approach to developing a range of housing and service delivery models for homeless youth in the Yukon. Through interviews with service providers and Yukon youth, the project identified core services needed to address the problem of youth homelessness, core approaches to service provision, as well as a comprehensive model of services and a more attainable short-term model of services. An overwhelming need was identified for housing options to provide safe places for young people to stay. Many youths were “couch-surfing” and engaging in risky behaviour to support themselves while homeless.

Although there is no single answer to youth homelessness, the project identified five core services that would help to alleviate the problem:

- Emergency shelter
- Transitional and semi-permanent supported housing options
- Permanent supported housing options
- Affordable independent housing options
- Wide range of support services provided by a coalition of agencies

Also identified were core approaches for service delivery:

- Maintain long-term collaborative vision for wide range of services, with incremental and do-able steps
- Develop youth-centred problem-solving and planning, to empower youth and staff with guidelines, not rules
- Provide a range of options for youth, not “one-size-fits-all”
- Demonstrate non-judgmental, persistent, encouraging and caring attitudes
- Promote harm reduction approaches
- Build relationships and collaboration between service agencies
- Seek sustainable and creative funding arrangements



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## Discussion Groups – Priority Areas and Recommendations

Based on the topics related to Aboriginal homelessness that participants had indicated they wanted to discuss, twelve discussion groups were formed for the afternoon session. Each of the groups explored one of the discussion topics in some depth and then identified, within these areas, recommendations on what needed to be done.

### **1. Homelessness and Youth: How can research support Aboriginal youth who are homeless?**

#### *Recommendations:*

- Deliver a province-wide continuum of services that meet youth where they are, and that are culturally relevant, accessible and peer-driven
- Research related issues include:
  - Development of best practices that identify issues of collaboration and address the issue of non-native organizations doing research on native communities.
  - Development of research that meets young people where they are area including creative approaches (e.g. Participatory Action Research) that are culturally sensitive
  - The need for meaningful involvement by youth in research including

### **2. Communication Links: How can we build better networks between people working to address homelessness?**

#### *Recommendations:*

- Research into what will motivate the public to act on the issue of
- Aboriginal homelessness
- Provide education to Aboriginal organizations on ways of improving networking between Aboriginal organizations and
- Aboriginal communities

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### **3. Homelessness and Addictions: How can research help address addiction issues among people who are homeless?**

#### *Recommendations:*

- Make spiritual connections to culture on the Eastside
- Hold a workshop or conference for spiritual, emotional, and physical healing
- Develop anger management and parenting classes for men who have just quit drinking and doing drugs

### **4. Aboriginal Women: How can research be used to support Aboriginal women who are homeless?**

#### *Recommendations:*

- Address the oppression of Aboriginal women by bands, which is a bi-product of colonialism, and results in Aboriginal women ending up homeless with no resources or help from provincial governments
- Bring communities together by engaging the homeless to be part of the solution. This empowers them, builds capacity and educates society, especially when they develop sustainable business.
- Create more shelters in urban areas.

### **5. Research and Best Practices: How can we encourage research practices that honour Aboriginal community perspectives?**

#### *Recommendations:*

- Involve the community in conducting research by asking for relevant questions to be developed – “by the community, for the community”
- Build the capacity of Aboriginal peoples to conduct their own research so that real issues to be addressed and communities can gain wisdom in the process.
- Adopt a culturally sensitive approach to research in order to involve the community, honour those involved, develop trust, and be respectful

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**6. Violence: How can research be used to address violence experienced by Aboriginal homeless people?**

*Recommendations:*

- Meet the basic needs of shelter both on- and off-reserve to include people who are affected by violence
- Create transitional supports

**7. Sustainability and Funding: How can research support the creation of sustainable services and solutions to the Aboriginal homelessness crisis?**

*Recommendations:*

- Quantify the cost of not funding support services that aim to reduce homelessness
- Co-ordinate the existing services more effectively. Examine ways of changing existing policies

**8. Rural and Northern Homelessness: How can research identify and help address the special issues of Aboriginal peoples living in Northern and rural areas?**

*Recommendations:*

- Find the time, commitment, and funding to support the research and find ways of putting research into action
- Increase the level of collaboration between service providers

**9. Systems: How can research encourage the development of better support systems for Aboriginal homeless people?**

*Recommendations:*

- Develop ways of better disseminating information generated by the National Homelessness Initiative, for sharing best practices with other communities, knowing Committee participants, etc.

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- Encourage governments to establish more consistent eligibility requirements that are better suited to the client group
  - Promote balanced and equal relationships of transparency and accountability in deciding on and implementing change in Aboriginal homelessness

**10. Mental Health and Wellness: How can research support Aboriginal people with mental health issues, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and other disabilities, who are homeless? What role does research play in developing solutions for health issues experienced by Aboriginal people who are homeless?**

*Recommendations:*

- Draw on the expertise of the community to enhance cultural competency and services
- Examine the benefits of using a strength-based approach to determine what is working and whether it is adapted successfully
- Determine the rates of FASD within the homeless population

**11. Racism: What is the role of research in ending racism for Aboriginal peoples who are homeless?**

*Recommendations:*

- Those most impacted at centre of research
- Look into the ways that racist institutional barriers, past and present, have deepened poverty

**12. Residential Schools: How can we address the effects of residential schools on Aboriginal people and homelessness?**

*Recommendations:*

- Create culturally-appropriate healing and counseling centres for survivors of residential schools
- Lobby Aboriginal judges and politicians to make policy changes
- Create more shelters, particularly for women fleeing from
- Domestic violence and survivors of residential schools.

## Participant List

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IN NOVEMBER, 2006 OVER 150 PEOPLE GATHERED AT THE VANCOUVER  
ABORIGINAL FRIENDSHIP CENTRE FOR THE SECOND BC/YUKON ABORIGINAL  
FORUM ON HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH.

THREE PUBLICATIONS HAVE BEEN PRODUCED AS A RESULT OF THE FORUM  
QUESTIONING RESEARCH I: FORUM REPORT (SECOND BC/YUKON ABORIGINAL  
FORUM ON HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH); QUESTIONING RESEARCH II:  
HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH AND ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES  
(A GUIDE FOR COMMUNITIES); AND QUESTIONING RESEARCH III: WHAT DO  
ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS SAY ABOUT HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH?  
(A GUIDE FOR RESEARCHERS).

THE FORUM WAS ORGANIZED BY THE NATIVE EDUCATION COLLEGE AND  
SPARC BC (SOCIAL PLANNING AND RESEARCH COUNCIL OF BC) IN  
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REGIONAL HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH COMMITTEE.

