

Unhoused people are at risk due to extreme weather in the climate crisis

Housing is a human right to an adequate standard for living

Issue Statement: Unhoused people in Canada are suffering from the effects of unpredictable and extreme weather caused by the climate crisis.

Policies

The first major policy shift regarding climate change happened in 2015, when Canada joined the Paris Accord to work with other global actors to reduce emissions.

Most recently, the Government of Canada released in December of 2020 “A Healthy Environment and a Healthy Economy” which is a new climate **plan with an emphasis on job creation and community support.**

In terms of shelter and housing, the federal government has created the National Housing Strategy which gives funding and financial support for housing needs including shelters and non-profit organizations.

Resource Flows

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Albertan provincial government launched the Alberta Recovery Program which aimed to help Albertans succeed amid the pandemic. The ministry of Community and Social Services allocated **\$60 million** emergency funds for homeless shelters and women’s shelters. An additional **\$48 million** was given for homeless shelters and community organizations to help keep up with the public health measures.

To find more information about available shelters, services, or if someone needs non-emergent assistance, Alberta has the **211-phone number**. Calling 211 can provide community referrals, available supports, and crisis management, and caters to individuals, emergency responders, and government agencies.

Practices

Alberta was hit with a heat wave over the summer of 2021 that highlighted the proximity of unhoused individuals to the cruelty of mother nature.

The City of Edmonton in anticipation of the heatwave launched an extreme weather response, which included



keeping several public buildings open to give people shelter.



Peace officers were equipped with water bottles to give to anyone who needed one.



Facilities that did not have the capacity for indoor gatherings provided water.



The city launched a pilot program turning some fire hydrants into water stations.



Community members also came together to help those who were struggling during the heat through organizations like Water Warriors YEG, a not-for-profit organization who sends out teams weekly to distribute food, water, and seasonal clothing items to unhoused community members.

Relationship & Communication

When thinking of unhoused communities and their relationships to other communities, one example of the bridge that can be built is Pekiwewin. Pekiwewin, meaning “coming home” in Cree, was a camp in downtown Edmonton focused on harm reduction and safety for those who slept in the outdoors.

Community members rallied around Pekiwewin donating food, water, volunteering to be emergency medics, as well as social workers and other community services came to speak with people and help. Pekiwewin also fought to change bylaws that targeted unhoused people, racially targeted individuals, and allowed police to tear down encampments.



Pekiwewin was closed in November 2020 after mayor Don Iveson announced a 10-week plan to solve the housing crisis.

Though the camp was torn down, Pekiwewin gave a home to many who did not have one and stirred conversation about unhoused people in Edmonton that continues.

Power Dynamics

Municipal and provincial governments are involved with the implementing of shelters and housing.

For example Alberta’s provincial government has implemented emergency shelters, the Provincial Affordable Housing Strategy, and has outlined a 10-Year plan to end homelessness.

As far as the climate crisis is concerned, the federal government is working to meet required emission targets and work towards implementing greener technologies to combat climate change. Another example of power and authority comes with municipal governments and police forces. As previously mentioned, camp Pekiwewin was torn down at the direction of Edmonton mayor Don Iveson as allegedly violated the safety of the public, and there have been other incidents where police in Edmonton have forced unhoused people to move their tents and belongings.

In the city of Toronto, three large tent camps were removed over the summer and the city spent nearly **\$2 million** in the process and set up fences to keep unhoused people out.

Both Toronto and Edmonton do not have enough space to accommodate their unhoused populations, forcing some to stay outside during the winters and the heat of the summer.

Mental Models

When discussing the discourse surrounding unhoused populations and shelter, the narrative is still largely that those who are houseless are marginalized, and seen as “less than”. The narrative surrounding climate change, however, has changed in recent years. With activists like Greta Thunberg, social media campaigns like Earth Day, and evidence like the Arctic slowly melting, climate change is a concern among many.

Housing is recognized as a human right by the UN and one of the conditions of “a right to an adequate standard of living.”

Shelter is becoming more necessary with the unpredictable and unprecedented weather climate change is producing, and in Canada unhoused people will be at risk both in the summers and winters.

Vignette

Finland has become the first country to adopt a housing first strategy (a concept that has been used in other municipalities, including Medicine Hat, AB) and apply it to the issue of homelessness. Put simply, this means that housing has no preconditions- for example, an individual could be given a flat even if they struggle with an addiction, and once they have a home, they are given supports to help them contribute to society.

In Finland, unlike other countries in Europe, the state finances affordable housing, and a policy is in place stating in new housing areas at least twenty-five percent must be affordable, social housing. That means there is a supply of affordable housing, particularly in big cities.

Having shelter does not solve the climate crisis we face but providing shelter will protect people from the harmful effects of it.



Finland made a structural change by renovating their big emergency shelters into supported housing, like turning a 250-bed shelter into 81 modern apartments with on-site monitoring and staff support.



Indigenous Land Rights

A Policy Brief on the Government's Duty to Consult

Policies

The policies that are currently in place regarding Alberta's duty to consult are *The Government of Alberta's policy on consultation with First Nations on land and natural resource management* and *The Government of Alberta's policy on consultation with Metis settlements on land and natural resource management*. These policies lay out when consultation is necessary for projects relating to oil and gas (and other natural resource) development, specifically, if there may be adverse impact on Indigenous and Metis peoples and their land/environment. Alberta's duty consult does not give Indigenous peoples a veto over decisions, nor do these policies require Indigenous peoples' consent.

There is also the *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* which was created in 2000. Its purpose is to promote the protection and enhancement of the environment. Indigenous peoples are only mentioned in reference to an advisory committee, rather than mentioning the protection of their land specifically.

The weak duty to consult legislation in Alberta in regard to the oil sands exacerbates the negative environmental impacts felt by Indigenous peoples, obstructing their rights to their land and clean water.

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Practices

Earlier in 2021, the Government of Alberta was working on a new agreement between itself and the Métis Nation of Alberta (MNA) to strengthen the duty to consult policy, for it to have more bearing. However, the MNA filed a lawsuit in June 2021 because the agreement they were working on with the government to create a more expansive consultation policy, was thrown out. In addition to the MNA, individual nations, such as the Beaver Lake Cree Nation, are creating their own consultation policy as a way to control their own jurisdictions. However, policies such as Beaver Lake Cree Nation's, are not recognized by the Alberta government and often get ignored.

Relationships and Connections

The relationship between the Alberta government and Indigenous peoples has never been great. In regard to consultation and the impact of the oil sands on Indigenous peoples, there is a “cumulative effect of this disappointment... [and] psychological and spiritual fatigue”. Many Indigenous peoples feel drained from the lack of actual consideration and consistently facing the inevitability of project approval and, therefore, the deterioration of their environment. Indigenous peoples’ rights to their land and clean drinking water have often been overlooked by the government. The relationship between Indigenous peoples and oil corporations is also weak. Corporate consultation often falls short of “supporting Treaty and Aboriginal rights and does not adequately assess the impacts from oil sands development on Aboriginal livelihoods and relationships to the land”.

In contrast, the relationship between the oil companies and the Alberta government is strong. The oil industry has been a large part of Alberta’s economy since the late 1940’s. The Government of Alberta continues to keep corporate tax rates low (it currently sits at 8%, the lowest in Canada) as well as royalty rates low. This is to ensure that large oil corporations stay in Alberta. Much of the turbulent relations between Indigenous people and government and corporations is due to the long history of subordination and colonization of Indigenous peoples in Alberta, in favor of the expansion of resource extraction.

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Power Dynamics

The duty to consult policy within Alberta gives all of the formal decision making power to the Alberta government. Indigenous people must be consulted; however, consent is not required. In contrast, oil corporations may not have any formal authority, similarly to Indigenous peoples, however, oil corporations do have informal authority. The oil sands are “a key driver of Alberta’s and Canada’s economy”, therefore, oil corporations’ interests are valuable to the government. There are also lobby groups that do have influence. Indigenous peoples and movements, such as the Idle No More Movement, raise awareness about the problems that arise from the government’s disregard of Indigenous peoples. These more informal streams of power, such as advocacy, can lead to real change in government.

0.166%

Provincial budget
given to First Nations
and Metis Settlements

Resource Flows

The total budget in the 2019-2020 fiscal year was \$60.1 billion, of that, \$100 million went to First Nations and Metis Settlements. These funds were given to “close off and reclaim oil and gas sites on or near their lands to help future generations use the lands in traditional ways”. This made up approximately 0.166% of the provincial budget. In addition, the Alberta government spent \$31,985 in the category of consultation, land, and policy. This category received a one-time block fund of \$16 million in the 2019-20 fiscal year.

Mental Models

The history of settler colonialism in Alberta continues to impact Indigenous peoples and their environment. While the beginning of settler colonialism may have had a reciprocal nature to it, the government soon began to violently displace Indigenous peoples from their land on to reserves in order to use the land for farming and resource extraction. The Government of Alberta (and the federal government) created a hierarchy placing itself on the top, enabling it to hold all of the decision making power about land rights. We can still see this ingrained thought process today when we look at the rate of expansion of the oil sands, and through the weak duty to consult policies. Indigenous peoples are looked over by the Government of Alberta and have their rights violated due to the history of settler colonialism.

A Practical Vignette

In Norway, the government has implemented a set of duty to consult laws in order to protect the Indigenous people in Norway, the Sámi people. The Norwegian duty to consult laws are much more expansive than Alberta's. First, it is not sufficient that the Sámi are merely consulted, they must have a real impact and influence in decision making. The Norwegian law is not simply a mandatory conversation before the government goes ahead with the development of the natural resource. It includes binding clauses that enforce the government to respect the Indigenous peoples' rights to the land and the way of life that comes with it. In the Norwegian law there is a “rightful sliding scale in which indigenous peoples' views must take precedence in cases that are of fundamental importance to the indigenous people”. Indigenous peoples' environment and cultural rights are protected under Norway's duty to consult. This creates more harmonious and respectful relationships between the government and Indigenous peoples.



Alberta Wildfire Evacuation

Alberta and the federal government are failing to adequately support First Nations during wildfire evacuation and life post-evacuation. Experts say climate change is adding fuel to the wildfires.

Approximately 12.3% of Canada's population live in wildland-human interface (WHI) areas, where human infrastructure exists alongside natural forests. The WHI covers 17.3% of the forested area in Canada. Within Canada's WHI, nearly 20% of the area is at wildfire risk. Across the country, 17.8% of on-reserve First Nations who live in WHI areas are at risk of experiencing wildfires, compared to 4.7% of the remaining WUI population. By the end of this century, these statistics may reach 39.3% and 17.4%. Evacuation due to wildfire is incredibly difficult for on-reserve First Nations due to poor communication, cost issues, and jurisdictional misunderstandings. First Nations account for nearly one-third of evacuations.

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These figures confirm that First Nations are disproportionately at risk from wildfires. Therefore, concrete policy must address wildfire evacuations and life post-evacuation for First Nations.

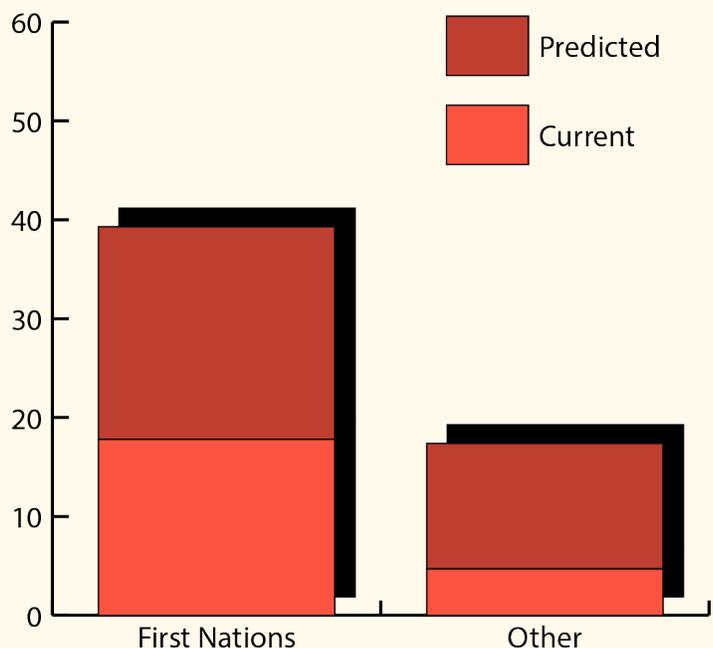
Practices

If necessary, the First Nation will declare a state of emergency, they may issue an evacuation order. The evacuation process comprises many different participants including, the First Nation chief and council, federal, provincial, and municipal government departments, police, NGOs, and the many communities that will host the evacuees.

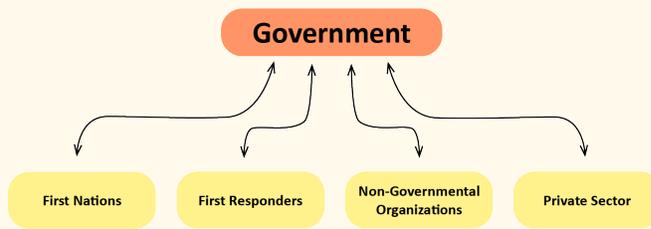
Resource Flows

In 2011, as WLFN was evacuated due to wildfire, members spent weeks in different locations across Alberta. Simultaneously, Slave Lake was also experiencing a severe wildfire. Slave Lake is predominately non-Indigenous, and media attention was focused on Slave Lake rather than WLFN. This fact was problematic as evacuees from WLFN were unable to stay informed.

WHI Populations at Wildfire Risk (%)



Populations of people living in WHI areas that are at risk of wildfires.



Communication is often lost between departments.

Furthermore, the process of evacuation is expensive and many members of WLFN were already financially stressed. Many could not cover the upfront costs of travelling and housing. Therefore, there was confusion regarding evacuation-related expenses. The First Nation faced jurisdictional uncertainty. Generally, the First Nation would be in contact with the federal government to address reimbursement. However, WLFN had to apply to Alberta's Disaster Recovery Program, then the province would be reimbursed by the federal government. The entire process was said to be incredibly long and burdening on a population already facing stress due to the evacuation.

Relationships and Connections

All levels of government are involved in wildfire emergency management. Moreover, First Nations, first responders, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector all play an important role in this area. Collaboration and communication are key to the effective management of any crisis. However, communication is often lost between levels of government, in between departments, and government and non-government actors. As noted in the Resource Flows section, there was miscommunication regarding the reimbursement of travel-related expenses which caused further distress amongst evacuees.

Considering the evacuation process was so fast, many families were separated and evacuated to different locations.

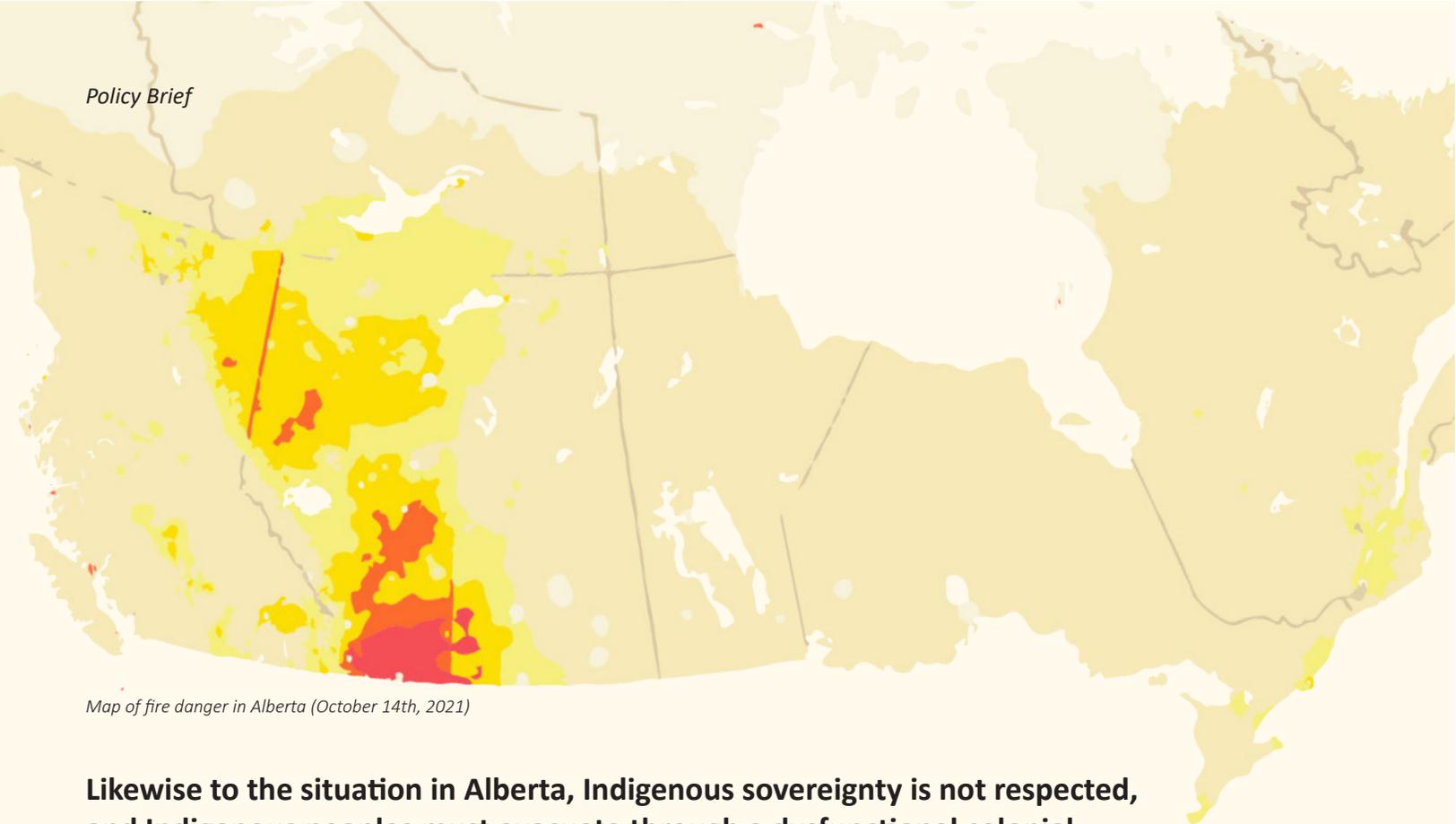
In the WLFN evacuation, many elders were not fluent in English. Considering the evacuation process was so fast, many families were separated and evacuated to different locations. As a result, elders faced a language barrier in receiving assistance. In one case, a couple slept in their car because they did not understand where to evacuate.

Power Dynamics

First Nations have the right to declare a state of emergency and order a mandatory evacuation in the threat of a wildfire. However, during the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire, Fort McMurray First Nation (FMFN) received orders from the Alberta government to not evacuate. Brad Callihoo, the CEO of this nation, has stated that the province did not permit them to evacuate because the province had yet to approve it. However, Callihoo issued his own evacuation order because he could see the imminent threat of the wildfire. From this experience, the decision-making power to evacuate was a contentious issue, as FMFN had to challenge provincial authority. From this experience, First Nation authority was ignored by the province, yet CEO Callihoo saved his community.

Policies

The federal government has agreements with the provinces and territories. Whereby, each province and territory are responsible for wildfire management, including on federal lands. However, the federal government may aid upon request. Despite the management being under provincial authority, support for First Nations is under federal jurisdiction. Therefore, the situation is complex. In the case of Whitefish Lake First Nation (WLFN), Indigenous Services Canada has an agreement with the Alberta Emergency Management Agency. This agency will offer key data, regarding public safety and the threat posed by the wildfire to the First Nation chief and council. This process is typical across Canada.



Map of fire danger in Alberta (October 14th, 2021)

Likewise to the situation in Alberta, Indigenous sovereignty is not respected, and Indigenous peoples must evacuate through a dysfunctional colonial system placed by their colonizers.

Mental Models

The relationship between First Nations and Canada's level of governments, is still one of colonized and colonizer. From the experiences, explored throughout the situation of WLFN and FMFN, Indigenous sovereignty is challenged by provincial authority. Despite being hundreds of kilometers away in Edmonton, the province ignored CEO Callihoo's call for an immediate evacuation. Moreover, governments did not operate collaboratively to maximize the well-being of First Nations during wildfire evacuations. Overall, the colonial mindset assumes that the federal and provincial governments are the most effective at aiding in evacuation for First Nations. However, there are systemic issues that have and continue to cause distress for evacuees.

Vignette

Australia is a comparable example of a state that experiences intense bushfire seasons. In the 2019 to 2020 Australian Bushfires, Indigenous peoples were amongst the most affected. One-quarter of the Indigenous population of New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria live in a bushfire-affected area. Yet, they are only 2.3% of the total population of NSW and Victoria. Yet, like the situation in Alberta, the evacuation of Indigenous peoples faced many issues, such as little media attention. Moreover, the evacuation process faced inter-cultural communication barriers. Following Black Saturday, the federal government launched a Royal Commission to better understand the country's response. The Indigenous population was regarded as a historical footnote rather than a resident. Likewise to the situation in Alberta, Indigenous sovereignty is not respected, and Indigenous peoples must evacuate through a dysfunctional colonial system placed by their colonizers.

