

# **Homeless Inuit in Montreal**

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## **Introduction**

Progress in economic globalization has accelerated population movement throughout the world. While the presence of indigenous peoples in several major cities dates back to the 1950s in western Canada, it has greatly intensified since the early 1980s in Montreal and other cities in Quebec Province (Lévesque 2003: 23). During the 1980s Inuit migration into southern cities became more pronounced than previously. According to the 2006 census, the total population of Inuit in Canada is approximately 50,000, and while the majority live in the Arctic, approximately 10,000 have left their arctic homeland (Statistics Canada 2006a). As to the major cities in the south where Inuit now live, Ottawa-Gatineau has 725 Inuit inhabitants the largest Inuit population outside the arctic. This is followed by Yellowknife with 640, Edmonton with 590, Montreal with 570 and Winnipeg with 355 (Statistics Canada 2008b).

There are many recent studies of urban Native people in North America. However, few anthropological studies have focused on urban Inuit (*e.g.*, Fogel-Chance 1993; Kishigami 1999; Lee 2002; Olofsson 2004). Thus, their life, especially those who are homeless, is essentially undocumented. This paper considers the life, characteristics and problems of homeless urban Inuit in Montreal.

## **Research Aim, Place and Method**

My research on urban Inuit began in 1996 as a part of a National Museum of Ethnology (Osaka, Japan) research project called "Indigenous Peoples and Cities in the World". My part was to explore the contemporary socio-economic situations of urban indigenous people in Canada and their ways of adapting to urban environments. I selected Inuit living in Montreal as my case study.

The 2006 census shows that there are 10,130 First Nation people, 6,010 Métis, and 570 Inuit in the greater Montreal area, which has a population of about 3.5 million (Statistics Canada 2008c). Thus the Inuit are the minority of minorities numerically in Montreal. In the Montreal metropolitan area, there are Inuit working for a number of Inuit and governmental organizations as well as general companies. Nevertheless, a considerable number of Inuit in this city depend on welfare and unemployment insurance; others are there temporarily for higher education or medical reasons, and finally, several are homeless. The life styles of urban Inuit are much more diversified than those of Arctic Inuit (Kishigami 1999a; 2004a; 2006). About 90 homeless Inuit were counted in downtown Montreal between April 2004 and March 2005 (Native Friendship Centre of Montreal 2005), but as suggested by the report on Aboriginal homelessness, this is probably an underestimate (Pisuktie of the NFCM 2004). Using a snowball sampling technique, I contacted as many Montreal Inuit as

possible at offices of Inuit organizations, Native Friendship Centre of Montreal (NFCM, a Native-run urban community based service organization), several shelters, parks and streets with the cooperation of workers of Makivik Corporation, the Association of Montreal Inuit, and NFCM. Because I did not select informants at random, my sample does not statistically represent the whole Inuit in Montreal. For example, I interviewed 3 students, 20 employed Inuit and 29 unemployed ones in the research in August, 2004. As I published the general trends of Montreal Inuit from my 2004 research in another paper (Kishigami 2008), I will focus only on homeless Inuit population in this paper.

### **Homeless Inuit in Montreal**

Homeless can be generally classified into three categories: situational (or temporary), episodic, and chronic (long term) (Beavis et al. 1997). The majority of the homeless Inuit fall into the chronic category (Native Friendship Centre of Montreal 2002: 19).

During my 2004 research, I was able to interview 12 homeless Inuit: seven men and five women. Most were in their 30s or 40s, with the youngest about 27 years old and the oldest about 50 years old. The average age was about 39 years old. There was almost no difference in the average ages between male and female. Although the female population is generally larger than the male population among the urban Inuit in general, the tendency is reversed among the urban homeless Inuit.

Of the homeless Inuit interviewed, six came from the Nunavik region, five from the Nunavut Territory and one from the Labrador region.

### **Life of Homeless Inuit in Montreal**

In general, the homeless Inuit spend their time along a main street, in three parks or at the NFCM, which is located in the downtown area. At night, they tend to stay in the parks or shelters. Homeless Inuit manage to live in Montreal by combining resources provided by the NFCM, charitable organizations, and shelters. Their resources include free food or meals, clothing, services, cash from panhandling and/or welfare. Many homeless Natives including Inuit in urban centres tend not to use existing programs and services due to lack of knowledge about federal and provincial government available programs and services (Carter 2004). Although many Inuit are not aware of it, since 2002, Inuit with two pieces of identification can get welfare money in the Province of Quebec, even without a fixed address. The social workers of the NFCM help homeless Natives to prepare the documents necessary to access to the Quebec welfare system. Most of the unemployed Inuit depend on welfare money from the Province of Quebec and get about \$550 per month on average. This applies to the majority of homeless Inuit.

Homeless Inuit congregate in the same places for sleeping and panhandling. They tend to share cigarettes, beer, food, and drugs with other homeless persons in same location, regardless of original native village or ethnic origins. The majority of homeless Inuit tend to avoid using several of the shelters and charitable organizations because they are discriminated against by non-Inuit workers and homeless persons. Although homeless Inuit are able to obtain cash income from panhandling and/or welfare, they spend the cash not to rent an apartment, but instead to buy food, alcohol, cigarettes or drugs. Many homeless

Inuit obtain an apartment with the assistance of the NFCM. However, because almost all of them fail to pay their rent and are noisy in their apartment, they are often evicted by the owners of the apartments after only three months.

None of the homeless Inuit in my sample completed junior high school or have any special job skills. Furthermore, they do not participate in education and job training programs, and do not speak French. Thus, finding employment is extremely difficult in Montreal. They generally cannot escape from their poverty except by returning to their home village. Also, many of them suffer from serious drug and alcohol problems, though it should be emphasized that the majority of the homeless Inuit have chosen a homeless life because they enjoy the freedom such a lifestyle offers (See Appendix)

### **Problems of Homeless Inuit in Montreal**

The NFCM report indicates several socio-economic factors that contribute to indigenous homelessness in Montreal, which are similar to those of homeless Natives in other regions of Canada (Beavis et al. 1997; Wente 2000). These factors are: (1)high unemployment, (2)low education levels, (3)single-parent families, (4)language and cultural barriers, (5) mobility (lack of preparation for the move), (6)racism and discrimination, and (7)substance, domestic and sexual abuse (Native Friendship Centre of Montreal 2002: 14-16). Homelessness among the Inuit shares these common features with other Natives in similar situations in Montreal. It should be noted, however, that homeless indigenous people have special needs such as cultural appropriateness, self-determination, etc (Beavis et al. 1997; Davis 2004; Duffield 2001).

Jacobs and Gill interviewed 202 indigenous persons in Montreal in cooperation of the NFCM and found that one third of them had a current drug and alcohol problem (Jacob and Gill 2002). My 1997 research into Montreal Inuit shows that about 60 % of them had or had had drinking problems (Kishigami 1999b: 105) and my 2004 research of Montreal Inuit indicates that almost of all of the homeless Inuit had a current drug and alcohol problem. The rate of substance abuse of the homeless Inuit is much higher than that of the general homeless people.

Because the homeless Inuit had had the alcohol and drug problem before becoming homeless, they were forced to give up their jobs as well as normal life. Also, because they have the same problem even after becoming homeless, they are not able to escape their homeless life. Because they spend almost of all their income for drugs, alcohol or/and cigarettes, they hardly have adequate meals. This leads to poor physical health (also, see Kishigami 1999b: 95-96). Concerning the physical health of urban Aboriginal, malnutrition, HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C are prevailing among them. The Inuit women are the highest risk group of the HIV/AIDS infection. Furthermore, psychological distresses such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and attempted suicide are augmented by substance abuse (Jacobs and Gill 2002).This would lead one to conclude that substance abuse is one of the most serious problems for the homeless Inuit.

Beside physical and mental health problems related to alcohol and drug abuse, the homeless Inuit in Montreal have difficulties getting access to communication means and country food. While the unemployed Inuit, especially the homeless, exchange information primarily on a face-to-face basis, or directly

through friends by word of mouth, those with jobs communicate by telephone, fax, and/or email. Furthermore, while the employed urban Inuit communicate with their families or friends in Arctic home villages to obtain among other things country food such as caribou or arctic char, the unemployed seldom have this option. Differential accessibility to cash thus leads to unequal accessibility to information and food resources among the urban Inuit.

Lack of access to country food is one of the most deeply felt problems among the Montreal Inuit. While unemployed Inuit, especially the homeless, tend to stay in downtown Montreal, employed Inuit tend to live in the suburbs. There is no close interaction between the two groups. The suburban Inuit tend to socialize with other employed Inuit or non-Inuit persons. As they also keep in touch with their families, kinsmen, and friends by phone and internet in the North, they often receive country food from the arctic Inuit and reciprocate by sending them gifts. On the other hand, the homeless as well as other unemployed Inuit without any communication means hardly get country food from the arctic, which they miss greatly. Although the suburban Inuit with jobs take pity on the unemployed and homeless Inuit in the city, they seem to avoid keeping contact with them in Montreal. This division is a factor which restrains from establishing any group consisting of all the Inuit living in Montreal.

## Discussion

In the Arctic, it is essential for the Inuit to organize subsistence activities as well as share food and information within each extended family and in a community composed of several extended families. Thus, many anthropologists have argued that the household, the extended family and the community are the basic social units of the Inuit for socio-ecological adaptation in the Arctic (*e.g.*, Burch 1975; Damas 1964; Fienup-Riordan 1983; Nuttall 1992; Wenzel 1981). Social situations in urban centres are very different from those in the Arctic as Inuit come from disparate regions and backgrounds (*e.g.*, wage workers, non-workers including homeless ones, students, etc.). In Montreal, the urban Inuit tend not to aggregate in a particular residential area but instead are scattered throughout the city. As a majority of them do not have their extended families or any Inuit community, they seldom practice food sharing, and their social relations are based on friendship and the shared experience of living as an Inuk rather than kinship (Kishigami 2006: 215). Under these social circumstances, the Inuit encounter severe difficulty in adapting to the urban socio-ecological environment of Montreal.

Molly Lee (2002) points out that in Alaska the social networks formed among the urban Yupiit, and between urban and rural Yupiit, contribute to and promote the well-being of those in Anchorage. Also, Donald Fixico (2000) illustrates that while urban Native Americans have suffered from low wage and unstable employment, alcohol abuse, high crime rate, assimilation pressures, etc., they have formed pan-Indian communities to deal with socio-economic situations surrounding them. As these examples suggest, Inuit in Montreal should form a pan-Inuit community to share information and other resources. Although the contemporary NFCM and Association of Montreal Inuit have contributed to the well-being of urban Inuit, they do not improve the capacity of the homeless urban Inuit to adapt to urban environments. An Inuit community centre, which could

foster social networks should be established in Montreal.

Socio-economic problems of the homeless Inuit in southern Canada are closely connected with those in northern Canada. The shortage of jobs, housing problem, substance abuse, domestic violence, and sexual violence remain unresolved in the North, many Inuit, especially women, will continue moving out into the southern cities from their native villages. As migrant Inuit might not adapt well to the cities and encounter poverty problems, including homelessness, a new socio-economic policy addressing both the southern and Arctic situations of the Inuit should be developed (cf. Walker 2005). The creation of Inuit community centres is likely to be one of the necessary solutions to improve the quality of life of urban Inuit across Canada.

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## Appendix Two Cases of Homeless Inuit in Montreal

To give an idea of the life conditions for homeless Inuit, I will describe in detail two individual cases (a woman and a man) from my 2004 interviews.

### Case of a Homeless Inuk Woman

The first case is that of an Inuk woman, who I will call Lucy (a pseudonym) approximately 35 years old, who married a French Canadian in the North. Lucy and her husband had two children (both were around 10 years old in 2003) in Montreal. Lucy lived in Montreal, Ville La Salle, and Alma for about 13 years before becoming homeless. She and her husband were divorced 10 months before our interview (in the fall 2003) due to her heavy drinking. Her former husband was granted custody of the children. Since that time, she has been homeless and panhandling on the streets in the downtown area. In Lucy's case, she does not receive any welfare because she did not know how to apply for it. Through panhandling, she can get a little more than \$5 a day but cannot live on such a small amount. Thus, she frequently takes free lunches at the NFCM and free suppers at various women's shelters such as Chez Doris, the Native Women's Shelter, etc. At night, Lucy tends to sleep in one of the parks. Only occasionally does she spend nights at one of the shelters or a friend's place. She is able to shower four times a week and wash her clothes two times a week at one of the missions run by local churches and shelters which provide such amenities to the

homeless,. She can also obtain free clothing from the NFCM and women's shelters. Although she has no place to live and has to endure rain, wind, and a very cold winter, she manages to obtain food and clothing in order to survive in the city.

Lucy has various medical problems connected to her alcohol and drug use. Despite this, she drinks beer every day and sometimes smokes marijuana. She shares and drinks several bottles of beer with her friends at a park and occasionally drinks heavily until the early morning at a friend's apartment. Lucy and her friend share the costs of the beer and continue drinking until all of their money is gone. As she also frequents bars, Lucy can acquire additional beer from male bar patrons. Once she and her friends get drunk, they often have fights with others or yell at each other on the bus or metro, or in the street. Although she herself recognizes that her life is not good, she finds it very difficult to escape from this reality. Once a month, her ex-husband takes his two children to the NFCM to let them see their mother. Because she cannot live with her children, she hopes to leave the city for her home village in the Arctic. But as she has an ongoing court case relating to a violence charge against her, she is not allowed to do so.

### **Case of a Homeless Inuk Man**

This case concerns David, (a pseudonym) an Inuk man in his early 40s who has spent several years in Montreal. He had committed a crime in his native village and had been sent to prison in the south for two years. After David was released, he came to Montreal before flying back to his home in the Arctic. But as he lost his air plane ticket, he was unable to go back to his home and had no option except to stay in Montreal. Currently, David does not have any job or fixed address. He receives welfare of about \$550 per month. If he wants to rent an apartment, he can do so. But instead, he spends almost all of his income on alcohol, cigarettes or drugs. Nevertheless, he is able to survive in Montreal.

A typical summer day for David starts when he awakes in a park in the morning, then goes to his accustomed grocery store to buy one-liter bottle of beer, which he brings back with him to the park and shares it with his homeless friends. Usually, his friends include not only Inuit but also French Canadians and persons from other Aboriginal groups.

At lunch time, David goes to the NFCM, which provides free lunch to poor or homeless Aboriginal people from Monday to Friday. The centre also gives out donated clothing and food baskets.

After lunch, David reads news papers, watches video or television programs at the Centre or uses the internet, or talks with other Inuit friends in the lobby. At the centre, he hears of news from his native village from other visitors or talks to his family or relatives in his home village via a telephone. Occasionally, he eats caribou meat and Arctic char donated to the centre.

After 4:00 pm, David visits one of the restaurants run by various shelters, the Salvation Army or local missions. There, he can have a free supper. Also, if he desires, he can take a shower and/or spend a night in bed. If he uses these charitable organizations and missions, he can manage to live without cash.

If he is not going to stay at a shelter, David goes back to a park where his homeless friends come together and sleeps there, where he shares beer and cigarettes with his companions. He generally communicates with them in

English.

From these cases, three points can be made. First, although homeless Inuit are able to obtain cash income from panhandling and/or welfare, they spend the cash not to rent an apartment, but instead to buy food, alcohol, cigarettes or drugs. Second, they obtain clothing and food necessary to survive from missions, shelters or the N FCM. Third, the homeless are having socio-economic problems that prevent them from escaping their situations.