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A weak financial foundation underscores First Nations housing crisis

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Despite the hundreds of millions of federal dollars that go towards establishing and maintaining the most basic living necessities on reserves, many First Nations across Canada are currently living in third-world conditions.

This includes the Aboriginal housing crisis, like that in Attawapiskat, which is garnering national and international attention, and shedding a light on the horrid living conditions on reserves.

People living in the James Bay reserve have sought shelter in shacks and tents, keeping warm with electric heaters and blankets, which provide little warmth in the below-freezing temperatures.

Many of the houses are dilapidated, seriously overcrowded, have no electricity, no running water and often have a pail next to the entrance that serves as a latrine.

While the housing crisis is only one of the problems First Nations are facing, it leads to and aggravates other issues: With a lack of proper waste management systems, the “houses” are potential breeding grounds for disease.

A Manitoba reserve is the latest community to garner national media attention.

According to an online article released by the CBC as recently as Dec. 5, 200 of the Wasagamack reserve’s 262 houses are without water or sewage systems.

The story describes a family of seven living in “a shack not much larger than a double-car garage.” Meals are cooked just feet away from the family’s bathroom: A single pail in the corner of the room. Head lice have become a serious issue, and the family’s 11-month-old baby has developed skin rashes and breathing problems from the almost constant smoke coming from the wood stove: The house’s primary source of heat.

In an emailed response to the CBC, a spokesperson for Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) explained that the Wasagamack reserve has received \$10.1 million over the last decade, funding that is specifically meant for housing.

This would average to \$1.01 million allotted to infrastructure per year.

But according to AANDC data on their publicly-accessible website, Wasagamack has a total of 1,706 registered Aboriginals living on reserve, which makes the average annual per capita funding for housing just \$592.

In addition, 2006 Census data shows that the average annual income (based on all persons who earn income), is only \$12,883, and is on the decline: It's an approximate \$2,500 decrease from the 2001 average.

Money for housing, whether federally-funded or not, is lacking, and in some of the communities that need it most. Census statistics from 2006 show that out of 255 private dwellings on Wasagamack, over 50 per cent required major repairs, and eighty-six per cent required repairs of some sort.

The conditions of housing structures in Wasagamack are almost identical to the situation in Attawapiskat, where 50 per cent of the 275 private dwellings were deemed to require major repairs in 2001. (Note: No 2006 Census data is available for the reserve.)

The major difference is that the Manitoban reserve doesn't appear to have received the tens of millions of dollars Prime Minister Stephen Harper says has been invested in Attawapiskat over the past six years.

So the fact Attawapiskat's living conditions are no better, has him frustrated.

"That's over \$50,000 for every man, woman and child in the community," Harper said in the House of Commons on Nov. 29. "Obviously we're not very happy that the results do not seem to have been achieved for that."

The federal funding total comes to over \$90-million for almost 2,000 residents. It's a total that makes Wasagamack appear to be, funding-wise, 10 times worse.

While it is clear that the amount of funding is not translating into progressive results, what's less obvious, is why.

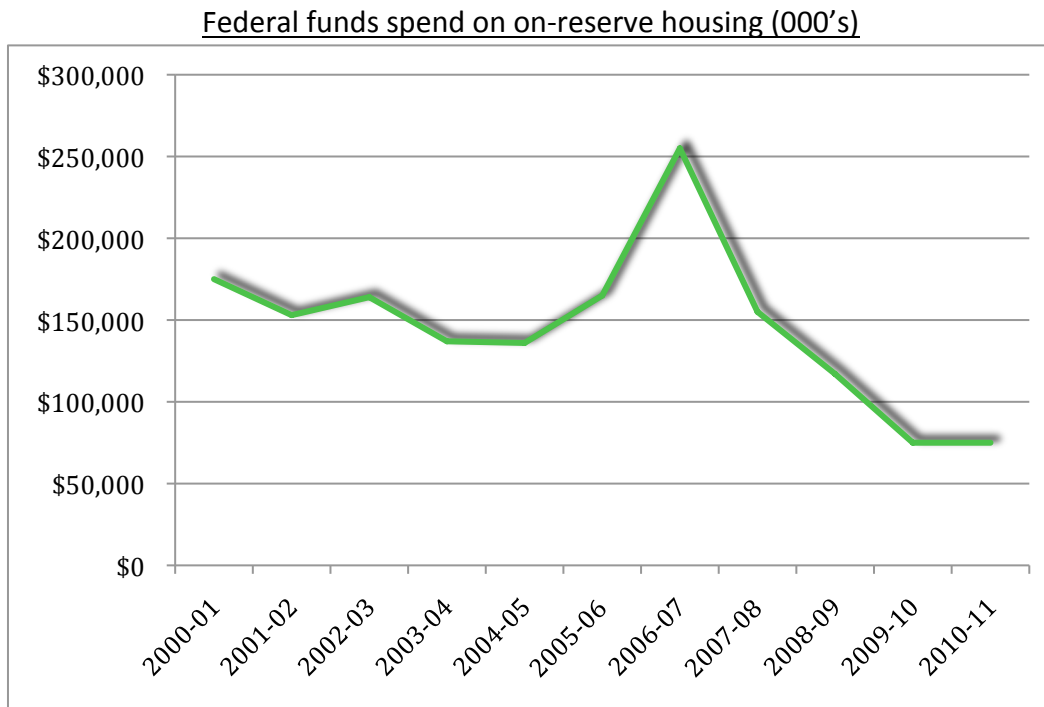
What Harper failed to mention, was that out of that multi-million dollar budget, only \$6-million was allotted for housing, according to Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence, quoted in the Huffington Post.

And for a community that has close to 2,000 residents, that works out to be \$500 per person, per year.

As it turns out, the multi-million dollar federal budgets are deceiving.

Over the past decade, the majority of federal funds reserved for housing have been distributed through AANDC, which was formally Indian Northern Affairs Canada.

The following chart shows the amount of federal dollars that have been spent on reserve housing, beginning in the 2000-2001 fiscal year.



The graph shows the amount of funding AANDC provided over the past decade, with the goals of the “construction of affordable new housing,” and the “protection and extension of dwelling life,” as outlined by the report.

While there was no specific policy on how funding will be used within the vague scope of housing, “improved technical capacity and reduced health and safety risks” were mentioned as short to medium-term goals.

The annual funding allotments vary, and in some cases significantly, from year-to-year. The average nation-wide annual total sits around \$146-million.

But trend-wise, the amount of funding is generally declining. In 2009-2010, the federal government gave \$150-million for on-reserve housing, to be spent over a two-year period. This brought last year’s total funding down to \$75-million.

And in 2006-2007, the fiscal year with the highest annual budget of the decade, the \$255-million budget proceeded the federal government’s 2005 approval to spend an additional \$295-million on reserves, over five years.

Of that new total, \$192-million was reserved for new construction of on-reserve housing, which is much-needed.

According to an early-2011 federal evaluation of reserve housing, the crowdedness of homes on reserves was 12.2 per cent in 2006, meaning that an eighth of the

Aboriginal population on reserves was living in housing with more than one person per room.

While the percentage is down from 13.9 per cent in 2001, and 18.1 per cent in 1996, the proportion of crowded homes on reserves is drastically higher than non-Aboriginal Canadians, which has hovered around two per cent across all three censuses.

The report also assessed how many of the homes requiring major repairs (like over 50 per cent of the homes on the Attawapiskat and Wasagamack reserves), got renovations.

With \$7,324,000 allocated from the 2005 supplemental budget, 1,003 renovations were completed across the country in 2006, a figure that tripled the targeted 369 projects.

While more renovations translate into more livable housing, it also means that instead of spending an expected \$20,000 per target, the federal government only spent \$7,300 a piece, which could bring into question quality issues.

The results also varied from province to province. For example, Alberta received \$1,798,000 in funding for 62 renovations, and 539 were completed averaging \$3,300 each. In contrast, Manitoba – home to Wasagamack – didn't even complete half of the expected targets: Only 35 of 86 renovations were done.

One of the issues preventing the alleviation of terrible housing conditions may be where funds are being allocated, an issue the government says is a responsibility of the bands.

AANDC said in a recent written statement to the CBC that: "First Nations are responsible for allocating their own housing funds [...] according to the priorities and needs of the community."

This extends to decisions like how many new units to build, versus opting to spend money on renovating and repairing existing homes.

But regardless of where housing money is spent, many First Nations are arguing that there simply just isn't enough money to go around.

According to AADNC information from the 2009-2010 fiscal year, the total average per-capita funding for First Nations (from all relevant levels of government) is approximately \$8,400.

This is less than half of what the average non-First Nation Canadian receives, which amounts to benefits of over \$18,000 in municipal, provincial and federally funded services, according to 2009 Statistics Canada data.

“There’s a chronic underfunding of essential programs and services,” Pam Palmater, an Indian Affairs professor at Ryerson University, said on CTV.

“It is impossible to manage a housing portfolio, infrastructure and education if you’re funded at significantly lower levels than other Canadian citizens.”

While part of the issue inevitably boils down to funding, or the lack thereof, like many issues do in all parts of the country, former Minister of Indian Affairs Chuck Strahl says the problem isn’t so much the amount of funding, as *how* it is dealt-out.

“We have an archaic system in the federal government on funding long-term infrastructure. We demand of First Nations that everything be paid upfront, totally 100 per cent in cash. We don’t allow them to mortgage anything, we don’t allow them to lever that money to do more good,” he said in an interview on CTV.

“So you might end up with a million or two or four million dollars in money for housing, but you’re not allowed to lever that like any other community would do, to actually meet the needs in the community.”

In cases like Attawapiskat, the funding was over \$90-million, with over \$6-million for housing.

But to the government’s dismay, the results were not apparent.

And they won’t be, according to Senator Patrick Brazeau, until all of the players involved in the housing crisis start tracking the money, through the system.

“What [we] should really be focusing on, are the root causes of why this is happening. And I have long argued that this is because of a total lack of accountability and this is why we need to have a national discussion, and a country-wide discussion, on the need for greater accountability,” he said on SunNews.

“Because people, tax payers and First Nation citizens living in those communities deserve to know how much money is being poured into their communities, if it is being spent on its intended purposes such as housing, and health, and economic development, and education, and more importantly if the First Nations themselves have access to the resources that are there for their benefit.”