

How do Indigenous People in Kijipuktuk Conceptualize Poverty? A Qualitative Study Exploring the Relationship of Impoverishment to Health

by Madeline Rae and Margaret Robinson

Abstract: This pilot study examines Indigenous conceptualizations of poverty in Kijipuktuk, Mi'kma'ki (Halifax, Nova Scotia) to lay groundwork for a holistic model of Indigenous poverty that can link with holistic models of Indigenous health already in use. Using community-based methods and Mi'kmaw cultural practices, the researchers conducted sharing circles and interviews with 12 Indigenous participants who had experienced or were still living in poverty. Results strongly supported the distinctiveness of Indigenous experiences of poverty and identified starting points for a holistic poverty model.

Keywords: Indigenous poverty; holism; Mi'kmaw culture; colonialism; community-based research

Résumé : Cette étude pilote porte sur les conceptions autochtones de la pauvreté à Kijipuktuk, Mi'kma'ki (Halifax, Nouvelle-Écosse), en vue d'élaborer un modèle holistique de la pauvreté autochtone pouvant s'articuler avec les modèles holistiques de la santé autochtone déjà utilisés. À l'aide de méthodes communautaires et de pratiques culturelles micmaques, les chercheurs ont mené des cercles de partage et des entretiens auprès de 12 participant-e-s autochtones ayant vécu ou vivant encore dans la pauvreté. Les résultats corroborent de manière marquée la singularité des expériences autochtones de la pauvreté et dégagent des pistes pour l'élaboration d'un modèle holistique de la pauvreté.

Mots clés : pauvreté autochtone; holisme; culture micmaque; colonialisme; recherche communautaire

Authors:

Madeline Rae (she/her) is a queer white settler cis-woman from Treaty 1 territory (Winnipeg, MB), with ancestors from Iceland, Scotland, Ireland, and England. Rae moved to Kijipuktuk in 2022 to study for her Masters of Social Work at Dalhousie University. She has experience working with and for Indigenous community members and is trained in trauma-informed therapeutic intervention and harm reduction.

Margaret Robinson (she/her) is a Two-Spirit citizen of Lennox Island First Nation who grew up in rural poverty in the Eskikewa'kik district of Mi'kma'ki, which is governed by Peace and Friendship Treaties. Robinson earned a PhD from the University of Toronto and now works as an Associate Professor at Dalhousie University, where she holds the Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Reconciliation, Gender, and Identity. She uses Indigenous and community-based research methods to understand how culture and identity support health and well-being.

Introduction

In Canada, census data indicates that while Indigenous poverty is declining, Indigenous people remain more likely to experience poverty (Statistics Canada 2025). In 2021, the poverty rate for First Nations living off-reserve was 14.1%, nearly double the rate for non-Indigenous people at 7.9% (Statistics Canada 2022). Research in Canada also consistently links poverty among Indigenous people to adverse health outcomes (DeCastro et al. 2011; Native Women's Association of Canada 2023; White, Wingert and Beavon 2007). For example, Indigenous communities experience higher rates of chronic diseases, mental health issues, and lower life expectancy compared to settlers, and these health disparities are often rooted in poverty-related factors such as food insecurity, inadequate access to healthcare, and substandard living conditions (Hahmann and Kumar 2022; Tjepkema, Bushnik, and Bougie 2019).

Researchers often measure poverty by comparing household or per capita income against thresholds set by settler governments. This highlights income disparities but fails to engage Indigenous understandings of wealth and want. In this pilot study, we aimed to determine the feasibility of developing a holistic model of poverty that could link with holistic models of health used in Indigenous health research. A holistic approach to poverty research has been espoused by The Native Women's Association of Canada (2017, 4; 2022, 2) and by researchers supported by Status of Women Canada (Kenny et al. 2004, 5), both of whom emphasize that poverty also involves a lack of access to resources, opportunities, and cultural connections. The Native Women's Association of Canada proposes that "poverty is social disconnection, which is why cultural identity and social inclusion are absolutely necessary to poverty reduction" (NWAC 2017). A holistic approach acknowledges the importance of cultural and community ties, which are integral to Indigenous well-being. In this study, we aimed to check whether a holistic framing of poverty resonated with Indigenous people living in Kijipuktuk and, if it did, we hoped to identify starting points for future holistic models of Indigenous poverty.

Indigenous poverty rates are high across North America, primarily due to lasting impacts of settler land theft and the destruction of traditional economies (e.g., fishing, hunting, farming; see DeCastro et al. 2011). Colonial governments intentionally disrupt Indigenous land ownership, possession, and governance, including appropriating land for settler occupation, forcibly relocating Indigenous peoples, and establishing reserves, destabilizing Indigenous economies, and establishing a pattern of widespread multigenerational poverty (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2015). The Native Women's Association of Canada states that "the colonial structure has been responsible for destabilizing health in Indigenous communities, especially through the displacement and forced relocations of Indigenous people to remote and/or rural communities" (2023, 1). Land dispossession, and the imposition of foreign governance systems and economic models, continue to affect Indigenous people today.

Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples are more likely to experience gender-based violence and violent crimes than cisgendered Indigenous men (Davidson, Mantler, and Jackson 2024). Poverty increases vulnerability to violence by reducing autonomy and service access. Indigenous women's economic power is further shaped by over-incarceration and motherhood. In Canada, Indigenous women represent 5% of the female population yet make up 39% of the female prison population (NWAC, 2017, 7), with many spending their prime earning years incarcerated. Indigenous women are also three times more likely than settler women to become young mothers, increasing their likelihood of experiencing "severe impacts of poverty such as mental health deterioration, and living in overcrowded housing" (NWAC 2017, 7).

Our pilot study aimed to better understand Indigenous experiences of poverty and to consider non-fiscal ways to measure poverty. Our research question was "How do Indigenous people in Mi'kma'ki conceptualize poverty?" To ground this work in the experience of people currently living in poverty, we used the case study of urban Indigenous people living in Kijipuktuk, home to over 16,000 Indigenous people (Statistics Canada 2022).

Methods

This study used a community-based approach that integrates Mi'kmaw practices. Our methods were informed in part by Dr. Lynn F. Lavallée's (2009) work on Sharing Circles and Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection, which offers critical insight into balancing Indigenous research methods and Western research principles in qualitative inquiry. We adopted Lavallée's use of sharing circles instead of focus groups and were intrigued by her use of symbol-based reflection in qualitative thematic coding (2009, 1-97), which we hoped would help to root our analysis in the words of study participants.

Recruitment

A total of 12 participants were recruited; 10 attended one of two sharing circles and 2 were unable to attend a circle but gave individual interviews instead. Participants were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling. Flyers were posted in central Halifax Regional Municipality (e.g., Gottingen St., Barrington St., Spring Garden Rd., etc.), and distributed to organizations serving Indigenous people (e.g., Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre). Flyers incorporated the Mi'kmaw pictographic system known as Gomgwejui'gaqan ("suck-erfish writing"), including images for "I honour you," "I respect," and "I thank you." To reach Indigenous people who may not access Indigenous services, and to make local agencies aware of our study, recruitment materials were also distributed to organizations that provide resources and support to people experiencing poverty. Organizations included: Direction 180, Venus Envy, the Salvation Army, YMCA, Halifax North End Memorial Library, Halifax Central Library, Dalhousie University, Halifax Sexual Health Centre, and Nova Scotia Mental Health and Addictions.

To express interest in the study, people were directed to make contact with Rae, the research coordinator, by email, voicemail on the study cellphone, word of mouth, or by leaving a handwritten, confidential letter for pick up at a local shelter or service agency. This flexibility in recruitment was needed because many people living in poverty lack a computer, phone, or fixed address. Most participants emailed the research coordinator, with a few communicating through staff at a local agency. A few participants called the study phone directly, leaving a voicemail. One scheduled their in-person interview through handwritten letters given to the Salvation Army. While we welcomed anyone who identified as Indigenous and had experienced poverty while living in Mi'kma'ki, the majority of people who responded to our recruitment call were women (see Table 1).

Screening

People who expressed interest in our study were asked three screening questions. The first of these was "Do you identify as an Indigenous person?" Since denial of Indigenous identity is a tactic of colonial regulation, we defined "Indigenous" as a person whose ancestors have lived in Mi'kma'ki since time immemorial, or whose Indigenous territory was elsewhere. We asked if participants were First Nations, Métis, Inuit, a person of Indigenous ancestry, a person with multiple Indigenous ancestries, or not sure of their ancestry. We invited people who did not identify with these categories to self-describe their Indigeneity.

Our second screening question was "Do you have personal experience with poverty?" This aimed to ensure study data were rooted in the lived experience of poverty. Our third screening question was "Did your experience of poverty occur while you were living in the unceded territory of Mi'kma'ki and/or within the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, or Newfoundland and Labrador?" This question aimed to ensure we were gathering data about experiences in Mi'kma'ki, since poverty experiences may be regionally specific.

To summarize participants' social locations (Table 1), we asked eligible participants five optional demographic questions: 1) year of birth; 2) highest level of education completed; 3) gender identity; 4) sexual orientation; and 5) time they experience poverty (e.g., "All my life," "age 60 and over," et al.).

Participants were provided information about the researchers, the study plan, their rights as participants, and how to contact the researchers and/or the Dalhousie Research Ethics Board with questions or concerns (REB #2022-6091). Where preferred, this information was also shared verbally by Rae, the research coordinator. Participants signed consent forms permitting us to record the sharing circle or interview, contact them to confirm transcript accuracy, and quote them in study publications, under a name of their choosing. Some participants could not be reached again. In these cases, participant data shaped our thematic analysis and was incorporated into findings and discussion, but direct quotes are not used. This was done to honour the consent of participants who gave their time to sharing circles or interviews but may have been prevented from participating further due to circumstances.

Consultation with Elder Ann Labillois

Before data collection, Rae met with Elder Ann Labillois, the Mi'kmaw Elder-in-Residence at Dalhousie University, for advice on how to approach the study and organize the sharing circles in a Mi'kmaw way. Elder Labillois accepted a tobacco tie and agreed to consult on the project. Over lunch, Elder Labillois shared with Rae that each sharing circle should begin and end with ceremony. She requested that Rae provide stones with words of encouragement on them (e.g., "love," "patience," "community") and permit each participant to select one to hold during the circles and keep afterwards if they wished. Elder Labillois also gave recommendations to support cultural and general safety during the circles. Elder Labillois was consulted again after data collection for her opinions and recommendations on the creation and dissemination of a zine based on study findings.

Data Collection

Sharing circles were led by Elder Labillois and Dr. Robinson. At the time of the study, the COVID-19 pandemic was of concern to many in the region, so the first circle was held online in May of 2023; a second, in-person talking circle was held at the Halifax North Memorial Public Library on Gottingen Street in July of 2023. We hoped an in-person circle could reach individuals who did not have a computer and/or private space to participate virtually. The Halifax North Memorial Public Library was chosen as the in-person location for its accessibility for people with mobility challenges and its long-standing role as a welcoming space. The North Branch Library is located in downtown Halifax, close to the Mi'kmaw Friendship Centre and other service agencies. Participants in the in-person circle were provided with pizza, coffee, tea, soda, and water. A spirit plate was prepared and set outside and leftovers were available to take home.

Our sharing circles resembled focus groups in that they were time-limited (2 hours), used broad questions to guide speakers, and were audio recorded. One sharing circle was held on an online platform. Traditionally, ceremonial talking circles in Mi'kma'ki are held in person (although the pandemic led some Elders to conduct ceremonies online), continue as long as they need to, and are not recorded or photographed. By incorporating elements of Mi'kmaw talking circles, we hoped data collection would support equal power dynamics, prioritize storytelling, personal experiences, and healing, have an unhurried pace, and be culturally relevant for participants. Sharing circles began with an introduction from Dr. Robinson (in-person) and/or Rae (online), in which each briefly shared their motivations for the study. Once participants had a clear sense of who was in the room (real or virtual), Elder Labillois led the group in ceremony. Once ceremony was complete, we began recording. The virtual sharing circle was held on Microsoft Teams, which records visual and audio simultaneously. In-person sharing circle and interviews were recorded using hand-held devices, with data stored according to protocols approved by Dalhousie University.

We asked participants: 1) What is poverty?; 2) What types of poverty are there?; 3) How do you know if someone is in poverty?; 4) What types of impoverishment have you survived?; 5) Does poverty look different for Indigenous people than for others?; 6) What does “having enough” look like where you are?; and 7) What strategies have worked for you for getting by? The first four questions aimed to consider poverty holistically by inviting discussion that might frame poverty in multiple ways. Questions 4 and 7 reflected our concern with the deficit-focused nature of our study and attempted to affirm participants as active agents in their own lives. With Question 5 we hoped to gain insight into how colonialism, intersecting with other systems of oppression, shape experiences of poverty for Indigenous people. With Question 6 we hoped to elicit a vision of sufficiency that could be compared or contrasted with Mi’kmaw values such as Netukulimk (responsible relations with the natural world, often expressed through protocols for hunting, fishing, or gathering).

We held individual interviews to collect data from participants who were unable to attend a sharing circle. Participants had the option of being interviewed by Rae, a white cis-woman with experience working with Indigenous community members living in poverty and who had been their contact with the study to date, or Dr. Robinson, a Two-Spirit Mi’kmaw woman with lived experience of poverty. This choice aimed to centre participant safety and comfort, as some participants may have preferred an interviewer with shared experiences and/or cultural identity, and others may prefer someone they are unlikely to re-encounter in daily life. Elder Labillois made herself available to interview participants prior to and following their interviews, though none of the participants decided to meet with her.

Participants received \$100 CAD as an honorarium for their time. In addition, up to \$20 was available to participants to cover travel (e.g., bus fare, gas money), and up to \$100 to cover childcare costs, with no receipts required. Honoraria were distributed by e-transfer immediately following the virtual circle and in cash before in-person circles or interviews. Participants were not required to answer the research questions or to attend the entire circle/interview to be compensated but only one participant in the in-person circle left early.

Data Analysis

Thematic coding was done in Microsoft Excel by the research coordinator. Our process was influenced by Anishnaabe symbol-based reflection, which Lavallée describes as a participatory action arts-based approach to qualitative research (Lavallée 2009, 30) and which honours the belief that “research cannot possibly be completely objective” since everything is interconnected (Lavallée 2009, 23). Our study incorporated teachings from the Anishnaabe symbol-based reflection by analyzing one study question at a time to reduce negativity or positivity bias. Quotes were treated as data points rather than answers to our questions such that stories and experiences remained complex and contextualized. Finally, stories describing methods for getting by were incorporated into a distributable zine to honour reciprocity and highlight participant skills.

Results

Following screening, we asked five optional demographic questions; responses are summarized in Table 1.

Themes

A number of themes emerged during data analysis. Study questions were categorized as themes, with sub-themes identified from participant answers. Sub-themes were created based on these answers if *more than one* participant offered the same, or a similar, response. Following thematic breakdown by question, the research coordinator observed if there were any overarching themes among question responses. Theme 2 (*Are there different kinds of poverty?*) and theme 6 (*Does poverty look different for Indigenous people?*) were the only study questions/main themes with 100% affirmative responses from participants.

What is poverty?

Our first question aimed to draw out participants' own definitions of poverty, and there were three themes in participant responses. At least three participants stated that poverty exists because of systematic failure, and not because of the failure of those experiencing poverty. As participant CTRG said:

Because a lot of people, for them poverty is a judgment of character, when it's not. I think poverty is really a failure of the system. People that have been in poverty are some of the hardest working people that I've ever met. And if they were just given a chance by the system to work that hard in a place that might give better results, or better opportunity, then they would have a really wonderful life. But again, the system has failed them. So I guess it's almost a combination of what is poverty, and what poverty is not. And it's not a judgment of character. (CTRG, May 17th 2023)

This quote highlights the impact of neoliberalism, which suggests that poverty results from individual failings rather than numerous complex systematic failures on the part of government and other institutions of power. Further, framing poverty as systematic requires acknowledging the roles of imperialism and colonization. This theme aligns with our assertion that poverty and health impacts of poverty must be responded to holistically, taking modes of oppression such as racism, necropolitics, ableism, white supremacy, imperialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism into account.

A second theme was that at least three participants defined the experience of poverty as being in “survival mode,” defined by participants as living 24 hours at a time, without consistent and safe shelter, unsure where you will get your next meal. As participant CM explained:

I think there's the extremes we think of, but nowadays in life, there's a wide range. Because I think just surviving is poverty too. You may have your bills paid, but you have nothing extra at the end of the month to do anything with your life. You don't get to live, you're just surviving, and that's poverty too. (CM, July 12, 2023)

A third trend was that at least two participants defined poverty as a “state of mind,” indicating poverty is about how a person interprets their situation. This theme suggests that poverty is not always defined by socio-economic-status. As T said, “Poverty? They always try to say it's money wise, but what I believe is it's an interpretation of a person's world” (Nov, 2023).

Are there different kinds of poverty?

All participant responses agreed that there are different kinds of poverty. Participants defined poverty in multiple ways but each definition framed poverty as a lack of something essential for a full and balanced life, whether that lack is financial, spiritual, or physical. Participants described poverty as generational (i.e. inherited from parents, passed to children), individual (i.e. not shared with others and/or unrelated to the influence of outside actors), or situational (i.e. dependent on circumstances or events). This is demonstrated by two quotes from participants:

A few like other types of poverty, or at least ways that we can define them. For me, there are systemic, generational, individual, and situational types of poverty. (CTRG, May 17 2023)

I believe that there are levels of poverty too that exist. In those levels of poverty, it's very—it can be individualized, personal to me, intergenerational poverty, community poverty, the area in which you live is impoverished.... (YP, July 12, 2023)

How would you know if someone is in poverty?

In response to this question, two or more participants indicated that unless you take the time to get to know someone's specific situation, you cannot infer that they are living in poverty by simply looking at them. As participant JLG said:

When I can tell someone is living on the street and has mental health issues, I know our system doesn't support them, and if I see them in the same spot day or night, it's pretty obvious they don't have a place to live, but other than that, that's a hard question. (JLG, July 12, 2023)

A second and related theme, touched upon by MB in the quote above, suggests that the impacts of shame and social stigma drive people to hide their poverty conditions. As participant MB explained:

I don't think you always do know [someone is in poverty], unless people tell you. I think people have a way of hiding it well. And if you're not particularly close to somebody, you don't know what they're struggling with. So, they may have nice clothes on, but maybe they don't have enough to eat. (MB, May 17 2023)

And CM agreed that poverty was sometimes intentionally camouflaged:

So as for telling if someone is in poverty, I think it's hard, because I think blending is a big piece of it. A lot of people don't want you to know, they don't want the stigma around it. (CM, July 12 2023)

This social stigma can have terrifying implications, especially in the form of Child Protection Services. As demonstrated by the quotes below, Child Protection Services was described as making negative assumptions about Indigenous parental care, which participants framed as a barrier to providing for their children in times of poverty.

We had welfare coming to our door, because my brother used to chew on his sleeves, they'd say, "You're starving your kids," my mum would say, "Look in the cupboard!" And she'd have the cupboards full of food, and they didn't know what to say. (CS, July 12, 2023)

And also fear of, if something good did come into my life, that it would be taken away. Constant fear that child protective services would be involved in our life and learning how to keep things a secret. (YP, July 12 2023)

What types of impoverishment have you survived?

When asked about forms of impoverishment they had survived, two participants recalled embarrassment when accessing resources, as T described:

I can think back to a time where we were in town and mom went into the welfare office and she told us to come, and my brother was mortified. Mortified, he goes "I can't let nobody see me coming in here, they're going to think we're poor." (T., May 17 2023)

Multiple participants expressed that they did not realize they were living in poverty until circumstances allowed them to compare themselves to settlers, either by moving into the city, or attending a camp or school with children who had access to more resources. Participant MB said:

But then when I started going to school and comparing myself to other people, seeing all of the middle class houses they lived in, it made me realize that—for me I'm still often thinking of poverty as realizing you don't have the things that other people have, and having people talk about stuff as if it's normal to have these things, when none of that is the case for you, and that was the case for me. (MB, May 17 2023)

My family grew up on \$12,000 a year from welfare, and sometimes I see these celebrities with a Rolex watch. I saw one that was like \$37,000 and I was like "that man is wearing three years of my family's income on his wrist!" It's hard for that to not make you feel crazy. (CRTG, May 17 2023)

Multiple responses spoke to efforts to shield children from realizing that their caregivers are experiencing economic/financial poverty, which offers insight into why participants didn't realize they were in poverty as children themselves. As MB explained:

I didn't really understand the severity of the situation until my mom came home with a box of food, and I didn't realize she didn't buy it at the grocery store. I started looking through this and I was like, we don't need any of this, why would you buy this? And it wasn't until years later I realized it was because she went to the food bank—she didn't buy it at the grocery store. (MB, May 17 2023)

Despite this tactic of shielding children, some participants had noticed the impacts of poverty-related stress on their caregivers, whether or not they attributed it to financial poverty at the time. Fears related to poverty were exacerbated by government intervention, as one participant described:

Poverty is a fearful situation regardless of who you are, but I find there is a huge added fear of child welfare involvement for Indigenous people who are in poverty than for someone else in poverty. (Anon, July 12, 2023)

At least two participants stated that poverty is generational, with both lack and strategies for managing lack passed down from relatives and/or caregivers. As DJ said, "We camouflage it, we hide it, and I'm very good at doing that. I learned that very well from my mom" (DJ, May 17 2023). Multiple participants expressed that living in poverty results in higher stress and fear.

What strategies for getting by have worked for you?

Answers to our question about survival strategies spoke to the importance of food security. Participants described ways to meal prep, save leftovers, extend the shelf-life of food, where to go to access food resources, and the importance of being attentive for opportunities. As MB described, "Stocking up when I see that something's on sale at the grocery store, being mindful of what we're gonna eat" (MB May 17 2023). Several participants suggested that traditional ways of living and building community mitigate or reduce the impacts of poverty and reported accessing communal or interpersonal food resources, as DJ describes below.

I love anything that's off the land. I love moose meat! My friend came up from Newfoundland and she knows I love moose meat. She and her partner gave me a bottle of moose meat. I can't wait to have that moose meat. Sharing meals, you know, with our community members, our collective kitchen with MCDC [Mi'kmaw Child Development Centre] you know, reclaiming our roots. That's a big thing for me too as well, is focusing on those items that we have off the land. And that is the way our people did it back then. We didn't have grocery stores! (DJ, May 17 2023)

At least four participants described asking the community/friends/family for aid or accessing helping resources offered by local governments or organizations. One participant reports that as a child they shoplifted from local stores with a friend:

We'd go into the store, buy something, I'd tap the lady on the shoulder, she'd turn, and he'd grab the money. First place we did it was the Capitol store up here on Gottingen Street. We looked at each other and said 'oh God!' It kept food in my mouth, shoes, food in my grandmother's house, so I didn't see it as being anything wrong. And I did that for years. (Anon, July 12 2023)

Participants also stressed gratitude, in terms of feeling and expressing thanks for good things, which they connected to Indigenous cultural and spiritual ways of knowing, being, and ascribing/defining value. As DJ and CRTG explained:

You know, even though there's other stressors going on in my life, I take that time to be grateful for the true blessings in my life. I think having those values that my mom gave me: be appreciative of the things that I have in life. And also not to be materialistic, don't focus on material. You can't carry that to your grave, you know. (DJ, May 17 2023)

It's just gratitude and forgiveness for myself. I start thinking a lot about where I wanna be, where I should be, or I want to be at this place in my career, I should be at this place in university, in my classes.... And then I sit down and I think: I'm exactly where you need to be right now, because the fact that I'm even here in university, I'm getting a degree—that speaks volumes for itself. (CRTG, May 17 2023)

Multiple participants endorsed thrift store shopping and strict budgeting as ways to make ends meet. Participants voiced an eagerness to share the methods that help them to make ends meet and to share local resources they have used. With participant permission, we collected these strategies and resources into a zine, *Making Ends Meet*, which was publicly distributed in digital and hard copy as well as distributed to local Indigenous and non-Indigenous community-based organizations and resource centers in Halifax Regional Municipality. Participants whose data was used in the zine were asked to review the suggestions and quotes credited to them and to sign a consent form allowing us to publish the zine.

Does poverty look different for Indigenous people than for others?

All participants agreed that poverty looks different for Indigenous people than it does for settlers. Multiple participants linked their answer to the role of colonization, as shown below.

Considering our people were forced to live on reserves, that has a huge impact on poverty. (MB, May 17 2023)

And I feel like... poverty is different for Indigenous people because I agree there's a sense of community. (JLG, July 12 2023)

I think poverty for Indigenous people does look different, but I don't have a whole lot of experience being in an Indigenous community, I grew up in Halifax, so I didn't grow up on reserve.... We were poor, but I also had access to a lot of things—a lot of things other Indigenous children probably didn't get. (YP, July 12, 2023)

Participants also highlighted the control exerted over Indigenous families by settler governments, which makes Indigenous people in poverty more vulnerable. As one participant said:

Child welfare is very quick to jump in and take Indigenous kids and place them somewhere else, even just for the littlest things, not just poverty. Just because this home may look like what we'd deem as a poverty situation, it doesn't mean that they're actually not getting their basic needs or are actually unhappy or need to be taken from their family, that their family isn't taking care of them. It's a sin, be-

cause so many kids get displaced when really all that family needed was some help. I also think it's different if you're on reserve or off reserve. (Anon, July 12, 2023)

What does “having enough” look like where you live? What would it mean to have enough?

Our final question invited participants to imagine what it would mean to have enough, and four themes emerged. The first of these stressed financial security.

There's a lot of aspects to this for me, and one of the big things I think for me is financial fulfillment, and other aspects of fulfillment, I think there is the coexistence with them. (CRTG, May 17 2023)

A second theme in participant answers was that having enough means being able to shift out of “survival mode” and ask for more. Participants varied by what “more” they wanted, with one participant framing it as developing higher ambitions. Participants distinguished “having enough” from having an excess of consumerist goods or money, with “having enough” defined very minimally, as shown in these quotes from JLG and YP:

Having enough looks like I can feed myself. I can turn the lights on, I have a roof over my head, I get to sleep in a bed. That's enough—more than enough for me. (JLG, July 12 2023)

Having enough for me, like having bills paid, having a place to sleep, being able to open up the cupboards or the fridge and say to my daughter “pick whatever you want.” (YP, July 12 2023)

Across both focus groups and individual interviews, participants indicated that “having enough” usually involved connecting with Indigenous community, land, and water. Participants indicated that “having enough” would mean no longer living in “survival mode.” Participants clarified that “having enough” is not synonymous with excess. Love and community were among the most repeated responses to the question of what “having enough” looks like, supporting the assertion of this special issue of *Atlantis Journal* that “healing is an act of communion.”

Discussion

This pilot study provides valuable insights into how Indigenous people in Kijipuktuk conceptualize poverty, highlighting the limitations of solely relying on fiscal measures. Participants' experiences underscore the significance of a holistic approach that incorporates cultural connection, access to resources, and social inclusion, aligning with the perspectives of organizations like the Native Women's Association of Canada. The study's findings suggest that poverty, as experienced by Indigenous individuals, is deeply intertwined with historical and ongoing colonialism, land dispossession, and systemic discrimination.

Participants agreed that the experience of poverty is distinct for Indigenous peoples, primarily due to the role of colonization. While the research team aimed to prioritize women and gender-non-conforming participants in recruitment, we did not ultimately reject any potential participants who identified as cis-gendered men. This likely reflects the reality that Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people are likely to experience poverty in their lifetime (Kia et al. 2020). Participants highlighted gendered impacts of poverty, such as those pertained to raising children, feeding a family, sourcing and cleaning clothing, and keeping house, as well as gendered responses to such impacts. Because our aim was to test the feasibility of a holistic model of poverty in Mi'kma'ki, the research questions did not pursue issues of gender in greater depth, but future studies should consider making gendered experiences of poverty a focus of data collection. This approach should consider the multifaceted nature of poverty and how gender shapes poverty's impact on health, access to services, and vulnerability to violence.

We found that the sharing circle methodology, guided by Mi'kmaw cultural practices and Elder Ann Labillois, did facilitate a culturally safer space for participants to share their experiences. This research emphasizes the importance of centering Indigenous voices and perspectives in poverty research and policy development. Future research should explore the development of culturally relevant poverty indicators and interventions that address the root causes of Indigenous poverty, while also promoting cultural resilience and well-being.

Limitations

Given that our sample population included individuals who are currently experiencing poverty, recruitment and follow-ups proved difficult. Rae communicated via handwritten letters, phone calls, emails, and in-person, but many individuals who could have contributed valuable data were likely unable to participate due to their circumstances. Since participating in research is not a highly paid activity, study data may be skewed to represent participants who no longer live in poverty, and experiences of poverty decades ago may differ from experiences of poverty in the present day. While gender was discussed tangentially by participants, gender-specific study questions may have offered more insight into the impact of gender on Indigenous experiences of poverty in Mi'kma'ki. Finally, experiences of poverty likely vary by location, and interpretations of such experiences may vary by Indigenous nation.

Future research should be led by Indigenous communities, engage more Indigenous nations, take up questions of gender directly, and expand accommodations to include more participants actively living in poverty. Questions about gender and sexual orientation, along with other intersectional identities, should be incorporated to allow for a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous experiences of impoverishment.

Conclusion

This pilot study suggests that a holistic model of poverty does resonate with Indigenous people who have experienced poverty in Mi'kma'ki. Participants indicated that poverty is determined by the absence of factors that support a well-rounded, balanced life. While many participants described poverty as living in “survival mode,” indicating a lack of money, food, and/or shelter, many also described poverty as a lack of spirituality and connection with land. These responses suggest that poverty, like health, can be understood holistically.

Funding

This study was funded by the Atlantic Indigenous Mentorship Network (PI Debbie Martin, Dalhousie University), and also supported by Dr. Robinson's Indigenous HIV/AIDS Research Training Fellowship (IHART) from the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute (PI Karina Walters, University of Washington). Our scientific mentor on this study was Dr. Michelle Johnson-Jennings, an Associate Professor in Indigenous Studies and Community Health and Epidemiology at the University of Saskatchewan, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Community-Engaged Research. Our community mentor was Renee Masching, then Research and Policy Manager of the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network. IHART Co-Directors Dr. Tessa Evans-Campbell and Dr. Bonnie Duran (now retired) and Research Coordinator Dr. Meg Meneghel MacDonald also contributed to study design. IHART Fellows who advised on study design included Dr. Misty Pacheco (Associate Professor of Public Health at the University of Hawaii at Hilo), Dr. Maya Magarati (Research Scientist with the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute), and Dr. Felicia Mitchell (Associate Professor at Arizona State University's School of Social Work). This study was further supported by the Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Reconciliation, Gender, and Identity, and by funding from that award.

Works Cited

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2015. "HIV among American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States." Atlanta, GA: National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention.
- Davidson, C.A., T. Mantler, and K.T. Jackson. "Gender-Based Violence and 2SLGBTQI+ Groups." *Societies* 14(11): 242.
- Hahmann, T., and M.B. Kumar. 2022. "Unmet Health Care Needs during the Pandemic and Resulting Impacts among First Nations People Living Off Reserve, Métis and Inuit." Statistics Canada Report Catalogue no. 45-28-0001. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2022001/article/00008-eng.htm
- Kia, H., Robinson, M., MacKay, J., Ross, L. E. 2020. "Poverty in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQ2S+) Populations in Canada: An Intersectional Review of the Literature." *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 28(1): 21–54.
- Lavallée, L. F. 2009. "Practical Application of an Indigenous Research Framework and Two Qualitative Indigenous Research Methods: Sharing Circles and Anishnaabe Symbol-based Reflection." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8(1): 21–40.
- NWAC (Native Women's Association of Canada). 2017. "Poverty Reduction Strategy: The Native Women's Association of Canada Engagement Results. Justice and Human Rights Department." nwac.ca/assets-documents/Poverty-Reduction-Strategy-Revised-Aug23-4.pdf. Native Women's
- _____. 2022. "Policy Brief: Food Insecurity." <https://nwac.ca/assets-knowledge-centre/POLICY-BRIEF-Food-Insecurity-Core-Health.pdf>
- _____. 2023. "Policy Brief: Health Inequities in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities." <http://nwac.ca/assets-knowledge-centre/POLICY-BRIEF-CORE-HEALTH-INEQUALITIES-IN-RURAL-AND-REMOTE-COMMUNITIES.pdf>.
- Robinson M., et al. 2016. "Experiences of Aboriginal People in the Risk and Resilience Study." Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.
- _____. 2018. "Two-Spirit and Bisexual People: Different Umbrella, Same Rain." *Journal of Bisexuality* 17(1):7–29. doi: 10.1080/15299716.2016.1261266.
- Statistics Canada. 2025. "Poverty and Low-income Statistics by Selected Demographic Characteristics (Table 11-10-0093-01)." www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110009301
- _____. 2022. "Indigenous Population Profile: Halifax, Regional Municipality [Census subdivision], Nova Scotia (98-402-X2021007-Eng)." 2021 Census of Population. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021>
- Tjepkema, Michael, Tracey Bushnik, and Evelyne Bougie. 2019. "Life Expectancy of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Household Populations in Canada." *Health Reports* 30(12): 3–10.
- White, J.P., S. Wingert, and D. Beavon. 2007. "A Holistic Framework for Aboriginal Policy Research." Ottawa: Status of Women Canada.

Appendix

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants	
Age Group	Participants
Born in 1960s (ages 64-54)	3
Born in 1990s (ages 34-24)	3
Born in 1970s (ages 54-44)	2
Born in 1980s (ages 44-34)	2
No answer	2
Gender Identity	Participants
Women	7
Men	3
No answer	2
Sexual orientation	Participants
2SLGBTQIA*+	4
Straight or Heterosexual	4
No answer	4
Education Level	Participants
High school	3
Vocational or technical college	2
Some college or university	2
Undergraduate degree or equivalent	3
Master's degree or equivalent	1

Doctorate degree or equivalent	0
No answer	1
Time of Life Experiencing Poverty	Participants
All my life	4
Age 60+	0
Age 40-59; Middle age	1
Age 20-39 Early adulthood	3
Age 13-19; Secondary school	2
Childhood: Age 6-12	3
Early Childhood: Up to age 5	2
No answer	1
Notes: Within sections, some answered in multiple categories.	

Table 2. *Thematic Breakdown*

Study Question	Themes
1. What is poverty?	1.1 Poverty is a systemic and/or a policy failure 1.2 Poverty is survival mode 1.3 Poverty is a state of mind
2. Are there different kinds of poverty?	2.1 Consensus is yes
3. How do you know if someone is in poverty?	3.1 Not always possible to tell 3.2 Hiding poverty due to shame & stigma

-
4. What types of impoverishment have you survived?
- 4.1 Embarrassment accessing food banks
 - 4.2 Not realizing until compared to others
 - 4.3 Shielding children
 - 4.4 Hiding poverty from others
 - 4.5 Poverty is generational
 - 4.6 Poverty brings stress & fear
-

5. What strategies for getting by have worked for you?
- 5.1 Food Security
 - 5.2 Returning to the land, culture, and community
 - 5.3 Asking for help/community support
 - 5.4 Gratitude
 - 5.5 Thrifting
 - 5.6 Budgeting
-

6. Does poverty look different for Indigenous people than for others?
- 6.1 Consensus is yes
-

7. What does 'having enough' look like where you live? What would it mean to have enough?
- 7.1 Financial security
 - 7.2 Community and love
 - 7.3 Not being in survival mode
-