

# HOUSING

## PRE-TEACH/PRE-ACTIVITY

Begin by having students describe needs and wants connected to their everyday lifestyle. Ask students to pay specific attention to their housing situation, and discuss the different types of housing that exist in their community and across Canada. Next, ask students to discuss how houses have changed over time and how Canada's climate can influence housing structures. Discuss that housing structures have changed significantly over the years: Indigenous Peoples created different structures using building methods based on the natural resources in their area. For instance, Inuit developed igloos, while Plains First Nations developed teepees, and Plains Métis built temporary hivernants or "wintering" shacks in wooded areas. With older students, begin the discussion about the current housing crisis for Indigenous Peoples.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- Students will learn about traditional and modern housing.
- Students will be able to identify Canada's main landform regions, their key characteristics and Indigenous communities located within them.
- Students will be able to understand that there is a housing crisis for Indigenous Peoples in Canada and provide examples.
- Students will explore current housing issues for Indigenous Peoples and how these came to be so prevalent.

## Foundational knowledge and perspectives

### FIRST NATIONS

**“In my dad’s times, the traditional gathering place** in the summer for our people was Fort George, an island located at the mouth of the Chisasibi River where it opens into James Bay. Every spring, Cree families would make their way back to this place for the summer. Each family would arrive in their own canoe and set up their teepee on their favourite summer spot. Spots were arranged by families, and groups of teepees would be set up beside each other to form a circle.

This is how all the family groups would set up their camps, with a communal area in the middle where the kids would play. Most families had teepees, but the ones that could afford it lived in prospector tents. These were usually the families that had had a good trapping season and did well trading furs.

The island was a place of gathering where our people could reconnect with family and friends. Fort George was also a place to celebrate events together, like weddings and walking out ceremonies for young children touching the Earth for the first time.

Once summer was over, families would pack up camp and head back out on the land to their respective hunting grounds to set up their fall and winter camps. Our family’s hunting grounds were upriver in the area known as Caniapiscau. The traditional winter dwelling was the Mihtukan or ‘wooden lodge.’ The Mihtukan is similar to a wigwam, like a teepee made of wood instead of canvas and insulated with sod. These shelters could be constructed to fit any size family and could lodge up to three families if necessary. Unlike the permanent housing of today, Cree traditional homes were adaptable and easily raised and taken down.

Today, like many other First Nations communities in Canada, the Eastern James Bay Cree live in modern houses, constructed on behalf of the local government and partially funded by the on-reserve non-profit housing program, part of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. For the

most part, these houses are rental units mortgaged by the Band. However, due to low employment and high costs of living, rent collection on-reserve is difficult. This lack of revenue for the local government means less money for maintenance. When this is coupled with the overcrowded living conditions due to a shortage of housing, the buildings become dilapidated quickly. Overcrowding can also lead to health issues, like mould, and problems for the children at school. They often have trouble getting enough sleep in an overcrowded home, and this affects their ability to learn. This current housing situation is a far path from the traditional lifestyle of the Cree.

My dad still looks fondly back on the carefree days of his youth and often reflects on his life. Back then, he recalls, every family had their own home. Once a person was married they would live in their own dwelling — mostly the Mihtukan, but also teepees or tents while on the move. But that all changed once the people moved off the land onto reserves. This had the effect of splitting the families and, in turn, splitting the Cree Nation. From then on,

everything was done according to Waamish-tikushiiu — ‘the white man.’ After a while, our society became more materialistic. There was a shift from survival to gaining material things.

Before the relocation, people lived a more traditional way of life. Afterwards, people enjoyed modern amenities, like plumbing and electricity, and a hospital in town. But it also made people more dependent on these things. Before, people would spend up to six months out on the land, from the fall to the spring, hunting and trapping. Now, most people take just two weeks off for the ‘goose break’ every year. While there are other programs to teach children about our culture and language, it often seems like the solutions are just temporary bandages on a deeper problem.”

— from *“Connection to the Land”* by Jamie Pashagumskum, in the *First Nations* volume of the *Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada*



## Foundational knowledge and perspectives

## MÉTIS

“Prior to sawmills being established at Red River in 1870, the Métis made their homes from squared logs. Early cabins were made from round logs notched at the corners and laid horizontally (*pièce sur pièce*). They then started squaring and cutting the ends of the corner logs to form a dovetail joint. Eventually the whole log was squared. The dovetail notching gave rigidity to buildings. This provided enough strength to allow for two story house construction. Early cabins had earthen or thatched roofs. Later, shingles replaced this form.

Eventually, in St. Boniface, the method known as *poteaux sur sole* (posts in the sill) became common for house construction. This consisted of horizontal squared logs slid into grooves between squared uprights, which were planted by means of mortises into heavy squared logs forming a frame or a sill for a foundation. The spaces between the logs were filled with stone, clay or straw.

The types of wood used in constructing a Métis log house depended upon what was readily available. White poplar and tamarack were two of the commonly used woods. White poplar has a low density with many air pockets, providing better insulation. Tamarack was considered superior to poplar because of its straightness, which reduced the amount of chinking that had to be done. The real advantage of straight logs, however, is that they provide greater wall strength, which depends on the fit and security of the logs. A primary advantage of tamarack pine for log walls is its resistance to rot. This was particularly important for foundation logs if they were directly in contact with the ground. Most houses had the rows of logs pegged together near the wall centre to increase strength and stability. Similarly, door and window frames were pegged in placed due to the shortage and expense of nails.

The outside walls of Métis homes were covered with mud and straw plaster and often white-washed. Many of the early homes were one story one or two room structures. A lean-to addition was frequently attached to the rear or side of the house and this served as a kitchen.

Louis Goulet, born along the Red River in 1859, gives this description of the family home at St. Norbert:

*Our house, like all the others at that time in St. Norbert, was built from logs well squared-off with a large axe and held superimposed by tenon and mortise joints and what we called in those days a ‘dovetail’. It was one and a half stories high, two times longer than wide and covered with earth and straw. The chimney was made from long poles which we called ‘wood-shoots’ ranging from 10 to 12 feet high. These poles were straight and planted side by side, and were covered, from the inside and outside, with thick clay mortar. It was used to heat and light the room. The windows were squares of dried rawhides which tried hard to let the sun rays and moon rays penetrate into the room.*

**Ordinarily only the parents slept together in one bed; the children slept each night rolled up in buffalo hide robes laid on the bare ground or on the floor if there was one.**

*The woodwork: the frames, the chassis, the doors, the floors, and furniture were home-made and fashioned with a ‘crooked’ knife. Ordinarily only the parents slept together in one bed; the children slept each night rolled up in buffalo hide robes laid on the bare ground or on the floor if there was one.*

Métis family homes also reflected the intergenerational living arrangements of families. Anne Carrière Acco provides the following description:

*The older Métis houses were built in clusters. The sleeping quarters “en haut” or “e-spimik” were built into a*

Continued...



## Foundational knowledge and perspectives

### MÉTIS

*huge loft area. Mom and Dad had a bedroom downstairs. One of the Grandpa's had a suite right next to the kitchen but across from the main block. A trunk with all his important possessions, and always his own grub box, were arranged nearby. He had his own stove with a kettle always ready for tea, a small but serviceable table big enough for two people and an extra bed for the grandchild who slept there. Attached to our square house there was a cooking area that served as a porch in the dead of winter, and inside was a large all-purpose room where visitors were received.*

Further west, in Montana, Métis housing reflected the materials available in that location. Vern Dusenberry gives a good description of how the Métis lived:

*In the settlements, they lived in one-storey houses, often gaudily painted. While on the plains hunting, they used tents. Frequently, however, their hunts took them far to the west, particularly along the Milk River in Alberta.”*

1- Source: Barkwell, L.J., L.M. Dorion and A. Hourie. *Métis Legacy, Volume Two: Michif Culture, Heritage and Folkways*. Saskatoon, Gabriel Dumont Institute, Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 2007: 65-69.

2- Excerpts from Louis Goulet, in Guillaume Charette, *Vanishing Spaces: Memories of a Prairie Métis*. Winnipeg: Editions Bois-Brûlés, 1976: 3-4.



## Foundational knowledge and perspectives

### INUIT

**“The housing needs in Inuit communities are the highest** amongst all populations in Canada, with 40 per cent of Inuit living in overcrowded housing compared with six per cent of Canadians as a whole. In 2011, the ‘core’ housing need — meaning the number of people needing access to suitable housing — was 33.6 per cent for Inuit, compared with 12.5 per cent Canada-wide.

Throughout Inuit Nunangat, a deep and costly housing crisis has persisted for decades. It began in the second half of the 20th century when more Inuit began to live in permanent settlements. In some cases, Inuit were forced to relocate to other settlements by federal, provincial and territorial governments because their communities were seen as too small or too remote to provide services. Commitments were made to provide housing to Inuit settling in these communities, but the housing provided was extremely inadequate. Many spent their first few years living in the communities in tents because no housing was available when they were relocated. Communities were instantly overcrowded, and households were ill-equipped by all standards, let alone those living in Arctic and Subarctic conditions.

Inuit communities lack the numerous and diverse housing options available in southern Canada. The housing continuum for most Inuit communities is generally restricted to public housing units for the majority of Inuit, government staff housing subsidized by employers and very expensive single-family dwellings that are limited to the few communities large enough to have private housing markets.

Because housing affects every aspect of life, including work, health, education and family, it is crucial that quality housing be made available to everyone. Inuit experience enormous stress from the negative effects of overcrowded and inadequate housing. The Inuit population is the youngest population in the country, with a median

age of 23. Throughout Inuit Nunangat, the chronic lack of housing stifles youth social mobility, with overcrowding linked to increased health problems for youth, who often find it difficult to get enough sleep or find a quiet place to study and do their homework. Having access to appropriate and affordable housing is critical for improving education and learning along with health and well-being.

Today, Inuit are involved in the direct management of housing in their communities. In addition to managing housing directly, each Inuit land claims organization has well-established and reliable construction divisions and economic development organizations that were created to ensure the maximum level of benefits remain in Inuit communities.

The solutions for improving housing outcomes will not look the same for all regions. Each Inuit region is unique in terms of housing delivery, roles and responsibilities (the nature of partnerships within each jurisdiction for the delivery of housing) and specific housing needs. In addition to inconsistent or non-existent access to federal housing funding, as described above, the criteria associated with federal and provincial programs generally do not result in appropriate housing solutions for Inuit communities.

Targeted efforts in the Inuit regions are leading to improved housing designs that will hopefully begin to spread further throughout Inuit communities, helping to ensure the sustainability of housing in Inuit Nunangat. One example of an improved design is a prototype duplex constructed in Nunavik, Que., following collaboration from a number of partners. A second example is a sixplex design under construction in Nunatsiavut by the Nunatsiavut government.”

— from “Housing” in the Inuit volume of the *Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada*



**Having access to appropriate and affordable housing is critical for improving education and learning along with health and well-being.**



## Points of inquiry and activation related to the Giant Floor Map



- **Using the Ecozones card and Forest Regions card, have students identify the different landform regions found in Canada.** Discuss the different types of housing structures that would work best for each different region. Have students draw pictures of houses best suited for the land. Think about architectural shapes and building materials available. Have students consider why they chose to draw what they did and how it would fit into the landscape of that particular region. Would it stick out or fit in?
- **Divide students into three groups to represent the First Nations, Métis and Inuit.** Hand out the Housing Issues and Regional Differences cards, and have students choose different locations on the map for their group (e.g., for First Nations, have some students stand on reserves and others in urban areas). Have students use the blank cards and markers to outline the key issues their region is facing, and begin to discuss solutions. Have students present their solutions to the rest of the class and discuss what steps would need to be done to overcome these issues. If needed, have students research additional information to present on the map.

## Age appropriate application and experiential learning

### ELEMENTARY

K-6

- **Take students on a field trip** to a park or forested area to build a lean-to shelter using natural materials (e.g., poles, boughs, tree roots). Discuss the difference between shelter and housing, relating the past to the present. Whereas in the past lean-tos may have been both shelter and housing, now it is unlikely that lean-tos would be someone's house.
- **Discuss how seasons influence** where people live, when and for how long. For instance, First Nations people may live in houses most of the time but may live in teepees, tents or cabins while out on the land (i.e., while fishing or hunting).
- **Help your students to learn more** about the issues facing Indigenous Peoples living in substandard conditions (e.g., overcrowding, lack of clean drinking water) by visualizing the conditions and relating them to their own lives. What, as a school community, can you do to help resolve these issues?

### INTERMEDIATE

7-9

- **Explore reasons** for present-day Indigenous housing issues, using the Housing Issues and Regional Differences card as a starting point for discussion. Have students do a deep dive into one of the issues to discover its origin, current state and what (if anything) is being done to address it.
- **Have students make a timeline** that shows examples of the evolution of housing, using the Housing Timeline card as a starting point.
- **Have students select** one Indigenous community to learn more about and create a case study of the housing issues it is facing.

### SECONDARY

10-12

- **All provincial Métis political organizations** have housing programs. Have students research the various provincial Métis housing organizations. What criteria are used for these organizations? Why would Métis often prefer living in these homes rather than other rental properties? How does racism affect Métis and other Indigenous people when it comes to accessing housing in Canada's largest cities?
- **Have the students read** the following report on Indigenous homelessness by Jesse Thistle and then quiz them about the many reasons why some Indigenous people are homeless.  
[homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/COHIndigenousHomelessnessDefinition.pdf](http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/COHIndigenousHomelessnessDefinition.pdf)

## Age appropriate application and experiential learning

- **In small groups, have students explore** community-based housing initiatives and solutions to combat the housing crisis. Examples include:
  - ▶ Tiny homes
  - ▶ “Northern Ontario First Nation residents get to design their own homes in pilot program”:  
[cbc.ca/news/canada/nibinamik-pilot-project-home-design-1.4374183](http://cbc.ca/news/canada/nibinamik-pilot-project-home-design-1.4374183)
  - ▶ Habitat for Humanity
  - ▶ Culturally appropriate housing, designed by architect Douglas Cardinal, in Oujé-Bougoumou, Que.:  
[djcarchitect.com/work/#/ouje-bougoumou-village/](http://djcarchitect.com/work/#/ouje-bougoumou-village/), [dev.ouje.ca/](http://dev.ouje.ca/)
- **Explore legislation** that has led to systemic poverty.
- **Learn about the differences** between on-reserve and off-reserve housing, particularly why on-reserve housing is underfunded and has long wait lists and what programs have been implemented to try to fix these problems.



## DEMONSTRATION OF LEARNING

- **Have students design** sustainable housing infrastructure for the North, highlighting the features that will make it successful and sustainable. Have them build models to represent their ideas.
- **Have students explore** how culturally appropriate Indigenous housing could incorporate green building practices (e.g., energy-efficient homes, green walls).



## LEARNING TO ACTION

- **Have students choose** a particular Indigenous housing crisis example and write letters or emails to relevant members of Parliament to advocate for better living conditions for the chosen Indigenous community.