



National Aboriginal Women's Summit – *Strong Women, Strong Communities*

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Issue Paper Theme: Urban Issues

Topic: Urban Inuit - A Woman's Perspective

ISSUE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INUIT

RISKS

The majority of Canada's Inuit live in remote and isolated fly-in communities across Canada's Arctic. However, there is a shift happening among Inuit that indicates a migration to the cities of the southern Canada.

Up to 10 per cent of Inuit now live in Canada's urban centres. Inuit come to St. John's, Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Edmonton, in order to pursue education and career opportunities. Still many other urban Inuit have fled their home communities to escape abuse, overcrowded housing, the legacy of residential schooling and poor living conditions in the North. While seeking a better life, they are often at higher risk for substance abuse, sexual exploitation and homelessness in the cities to which they have moved. Still others move to the South to access specialized healthcare and treatment options that are not available in their home community.

When discussing the challenges faced by urban Inuit women, we must address the two distinct categories of Inuit living in Canadian cities: new urban and long-time urban. While the two sets of Inuit face many of the same obstacles, there are some challenges that are unique to each.

When an Inuit woman moves from a remote community to a southern city, the culture shock can be overwhelming. The pace of life, the weather, and the sheer numbers of strange people can be both exciting and isolating at the same time. New comers to urban centres are often unaware of any resources that might be available to them and/or they are unsure or unable to access these resources. Access to childcare, healthcare, provincial health insurance, housing, to name but a few, can be fraught with bureaucracy that is nearly impossible to negotiate. Language barriers also present a challenge to those Inuit who are unilingual Inuktitut speakers. An Inuk woman who cannot negotiate the system may not be able to access the childcare she needs in order to take advantage of the education and employment opportunities she came down for in the first place.

The vulnerability of Inuit newcomers to southern cities can be dangerous in the face of those looking for people to exploit. Inuit women in particular arriving in urban centres are at an increase risk for substance abuse, sexual exploitation and homelessness.

Inuit are sometimes faced with systemic racism that further hinders their chances at successfully transitioning from a remote to an urban setting.

Long-time urban Inuit are not exempt from racism either. While their ethnicity can be a barrier, urban Inuit women can also feel a sense of alienation from their own culture. It is very difficult for urban Inuit to find other Inuit with whom they can speak their language and partake in traditional cultural practices. This loss of cultural identity can make it very difficult for urban Inuit to know where and to whom they 'belong'. The sense of belonging can be critical to an individual's personal development. Also, distinguishing one's self as an Inuk amid the sea of other ethnic minorities is no small task. Finally, if an urban Inuk wants to return to their home community for whatever reason, the costs of doing so are prohibitive.

Perhaps most importantly, urban Inuit are often not counted at Census time because of the language barrier that exists. When governments use these statistics to make policies, the urban Inuit population is not taken into consideration because they are not being counted properly.

Urban Inuit Early Childhood Development Needs¹

- Accessible funding and capital investments for infrastructure are key for Inuit living outside of the land claim regions. Inuit gatherings are essential for social and mental health;
- A Centre for Gathering in all major urban locations with populations of Inuit. This centre will be a 'one stop shop' with a wide range of language and cultural programs and services for Inuit. It would include:
 - an Inuit Head Start;
 - a drop in centre for youth and families;
 - cultural programming such as games, story telling, drum dancing, throat singing, sewing and crafts;
 - after school programs;
 - support programs for single parents, parent with teens and pregnant women;
 - assistance for obtaining N numbers for non-insured health benefits;
 - recreational activities for both children and adults and
 - programs for children between 8-12 years of age.
- ELCC that is easily available, accessible and affordable and there must be an allotment of Aboriginal or other funds specifically set aside for Inuit ELCC;
- Incorporation of Inuktitut into programs and more culturally appropriate things in our facilities. Traditional skills and values and the inclusion of traditional knowledge;
- Human resources and training are required. Hiring and training opportunities must be culturally appropriate. Guidance and support to Inuit staff is required;
- Services for children with special needs and their families;

¹ Final Report of the Urban ELCC Engagement convened in Ottawa March 2006.

- Counselling, capacity building, healing, self esteem, a father support system;
- Cross cultural training is needed for non-Inuit social services staff and apprehensions should include more consultation with Inuit families and consider culture. Inuit children must be placed with Inuit foster care as much as possible and a support system for Inuit children that are apprehended and/or adopted by non-Inuit families need to be provided;
- Transportation is needed for Inuit families and elders to attend gathering and events. Inuit tend to be spread out into suburbs and can not easily access services;
- Involve both Inuit and funding partners at meetings and gatherings to ensure sustainability of our programs. Work with Federal, Provincial and Territorial Governments and agencies to ensure that proper statistics of all Urban Inuit, and information with respect to demographics and service statistics are obtained;
- More networking through such events as annual gatherings and excursions with different urban and other Inuit regions to share and exchange urban Inuit ideas including Inuit sports and games, culturally relevant activities, feasts with country foods;
- A National Urban Inuit Committee on ELCC: two members would sit on the Inuit Early Child Development Working Group (IECDWG).

OPPORTUNITIES

Recommendations

- Statistics Canada undertake census research regarding Inuit in urban centres;
- Increased funding for existing urban Inuit Friendship Centre and new funding for similar models in other cities where Inuit reside and
- Resources for services such as homeless shelter, addictions counseling, and healing models, that are Inuit-inclusive and not only First-Nations specific.