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Aboriginal Youth in Canada: Emerging Issues, Research Priorities, and Policy Implications

Workshop Report



March 17, 2008

PRI Project
Investing in Youth

Prepared by:
Geneviève Kroes
Policy Research Initiative

Workshop Partner:
Indian and Northern
Affairs Canada

Canada

Sonny Assu (artist for the cover image)

Laich-kwil-tach from the Wei Wai Kai

(Cape Mudge) band

Sonny Assu is among Canada's most promising emerging artists. He combines contemporary aesthetics with traditional Northwest Coast form-line and design. His paintings and sculptures experiment with notions of commodification and the readymade, but are a critique of contemporary culture. "I am a product of pop culture. I grew up in the age of mass media advertising and subliminal adverts" he says [but] "I am able to combine my pop roots with my traditional Laich-kwil-tach heritage."

When describing the cover illustration, Personal Totem #1, the artist explores how people identify with items of pop and technology culture to define their personal heritage. "Whether it's an ipod, a cell phone or something as simple as a cup of coffee, we all chose these things to dictate our personal lineage. It helps us to relate, on a subconscious level, to those around us. We might not have anything in common with the people around us in our day to day lives, but once we see that they have something similar, we become connected through the use of totemic representation. In essence, something as simple as an iPod becomes our totem, we become part of the iPod clan and are able to relate on that level to those around us."

< <http://sonnyassu.com> >

**Aboriginal Youth in Canada:
Emerging Issues, Research Priorities, and Policy
Implications**

March 17, 2008

**Report of the Roundtable on Aboriginal Youth
Workshop Report**

PRI Project

Investing in Youth

**Geneviève Kroes
Policy Research Initiative**

Acknowledgments

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Background

In December 2006, the Policy Research Initiative (PRI) launched a research project to examine the changing realities facing today's youth and their implications for public policy. The objective of the project *Investing in Youth: Evidence from Policy, Practice, and Research* is to develop a knowledge base and a conceptual framework for supporting effective analysis, measurement, and responses to youth-related issues in Canada. In the first phase of the project, two roundtables and a series of background papers were commissioned to gather input for the project's development, explore recent research findings and discuss international developments in the area of youth policy. This phase of the project set the stage by defining the key emerging issues for youth and identifying medium-term research priorities.

On March 17, 2008, a roundtable with experts on Aboriginal youth was held as part of the project's second phase. It was hosted by the PRI in partnership with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and in consultation with five other federal departments. This event built on a special volume of the public policy journal *Horizons* entitled "Hope or Heartbreak: Young Aboriginals and Canada's Future" (March 2008). The half-day event brought together more than 30 experts, including researchers, senior federal representatives, and community practitioners, to discuss the issues facing a rapidly growing young Aboriginal population, including changing conditions, new aspects of vulnerability, and implications for public policy.

Overall, the roundtable discussion was characterized by passion and commitment. Although there was a general consensus over the pressing need to improve education, the experts differed in their opinions about other priority issues. Generally, the discussion followed two threads:

- the "what," i.e., identifying and discussing the emerging issues that require attention; and
- the "how," i.e., discussing respectful and ethical ways to study the issues, develop relevant policies, and implement programs.

This report reflects the PRI's attempt to integrate both the research findings and the comments provided by the roundtable participants.

Introduction

Forward-looking exercises and trends analyses enable stakeholders to anticipate the key issues over the next decade. They present an opportunity to shift policy making from being reactive to being proactive and strategic in priority areas. Identifying the emerging issues facing Aboriginal youth and developing an awareness of different ways the future may unfold can help decision makers realize the impact their decisions might have.

To open the discussion, experts at the roundtable briefly stated what they viewed as the most significant issues facing Aboriginal youth over the next five to ten years. While their statements reflected diverse perspectives, they generally agreed that the four most significant issues are:

- **education**, including the need to increase educational attainment;
- **family and community well-being**, including intergenerational dynamics of change, identity and culture, and building healthy communities;
- **criminal justice**, including ways to reduce Aboriginal youth incarceration rates and cycles of violence; and
- the importance of **changing the way governments and Aboriginal communities work together**.

This report is divided into two sections. The first section discusses education, family and community well-being, and criminal justice as key issues for the medium-term research agenda. For each topic, the report broadly describes the core of the issue, provides context with existing literature and Census 2006 data,¹ and outlines the participants' views on forward-looking trends, policy implications, promising approaches, and future directions for research. The second section focuses on the participants' recommendations for successful approaches to research and policy development by improving the way that governments and Aboriginal communities work together through more collaborative research practices, community or place-based policies, and increasingly relevant programs for Aboriginal people.

I. Setting the Medium-Term Research Agenda: Key Pressures and Emerging Issues

A. Education

Issue

Post-secondary education (PSE) enrolment and completion rates for Aboriginal people have been steadily increasing over the past two decades. Although these educational outcomes are consistently improving, Aboriginal youth remain underrepresented in enrolment at Canadian colleges, universities, and other post-secondary institutions. While this is not a new trend, what is changing is the increasing pressure from the labour market for highly educated workers. In a climate of intensifying competition for skilled labour, higher education and lifelong learning is becoming a condition for success.

Context

Evidence shows that educational achievement varies significantly across Aboriginal groups.² Studies led by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada reveal that the educational achievement of registered Indians living on-reserve and the Inuit lag behind other Aboriginal groups and non-Aboriginal Canadians. In 2006, close to half of the Inuit and First Nations on-reserve adult population did not have a high school diploma, compared with 15% of other Canadians. Roughly 4% of these two groups had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 23% of other Canadians.³ Studies also show that Aboriginal people are more likely than others to leave school at an early age, though they are also more likely to return to school later in life.

Lower enrolment rates of Aboriginal youth in post-secondary institutions are often explained in reference to the broader socio-economic and historical context where one or several factors create barriers to formal educational achievement. These include overcrowded living conditions, unemployment, and poverty. Studies also show that Aboriginal students face more subtle barriers, such as discrimination, low self-esteem, and frequent school transfers due to high mobility rates, as well as institutional insensitivity to Aboriginal cultures (Malatest 2004; National Council on Welfare 2007).

Several roundtable participants shared their concerns that many Aboriginal students proceed to post-secondary institutions without adequate high school preparation and sometimes struggle to balance education with family responsibilities. Combined with the intergenerational effects of residential schools on individuals, families, and communities, the barriers many Aboriginal students must overcome to fully participate and succeed in PSE can be daunting. At the same time, an increasingly knowledge-based economy is raising the demand for higher levels of education among all members of the workforce.

The lower rate of formal education significantly influences health outcomes, wealth, and opportunities for inclusion and participation. These are all factors that in turn influence subsequent generations' entry into and completion of post-

Roots to Routes is a four-credit, grade 12 program offered at Moira Secondary School in Belleville, Ont. It is a school that includes more than 100 students from the Bay of Quinte. The program consists of classes in the Mohawk language, Native studies, environmental issues, and a practicum. A trip to an out-of-province First Nation community is normally scheduled and financed through fundraising by both the students themselves and the Tyendinaga community, along with a small subsidy from the band. This program is oversubscribed by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and its appeal lies in its team-building, mind-building, and academically rigorous approach. Its success can be attributed to the initiative of one teacher, Troy Maracle, who is a member of the local First Nations community. Success stories such as this, if publicized, could become the basis for local innovation or even policy to support such initiatives.

(Submitted by Dr. Marlene Brant Castellano)

secondary education. Successful completion of post-secondary education can have a cumulatively reinforcing effect over the course of multiple generations.

Looking forward

Although there are data gaps (notably a lack of longitudinal or time-series data), Census data shows that recent developments in educational participation and attainment for Aboriginal youth have been positive. In 2001, 38% of all Aboriginal people in Canada were post-secondary graduates. In 2006, this figure increased to 44%, among whom⁴:

- 14% had trade credentials,
- 19% had a college diploma, and
- 8% had a university degree (up from 6% in 2001).⁵

Although the percentage of Aboriginal people in Canada with a university degree continues to increase, Aboriginal people were still much less likely to have a university degree than other Canadians (8% compared with 23% in 2006), a gap that has grown somewhat (6% compared with 20% in 2001). This finding

underscores the fact that while recent improvements in outcomes are to be celebrated, the real challenge lies in ensuring that improvements keep up with the changing demands of the labour market over the long term.

The employment rate for Aboriginal people also increased by 3.3 percentage points between 2001 and 2006. However, it is still lower compared with the overall rate for Canadians (66% compared with 88%). Though this gap is closing, it is closing slowly: one of the roundtable participants, Dr. Andrew Sharpe, estimated that if the current trends continue, the gap will only be completely closed by 2031.

Policy implications

Improving Aboriginal educational outcomes would have at least three primary benefits:

- 1) It would significantly increase the employability and labour market prospects of Aboriginal people. Given current and projected skills and labour shortages in provinces with large Aboriginal populations, better educated and more skilled Aboriginal youth in particular will enjoy much greater employment opportunities.
- 2) It would contribute to Canada's overall productivity. Given an aging population and declining birthrates, economists are beginning to look to the potential of groups that are currently underrepresented in the labour force to contribute to Canada's productivity challenge.
- 3) It would foster more positive intergenerational cycles. Increasing the level of formal education has also been shown to have a positive influence on the educational achievement of subsequent generations.

From Dr. Sharpe's perspective, the key to increasing the rate of Aboriginal PSE completion is improving the quality of education provided to Aboriginal high school students. This is necessary to increase the number of youth who pursue post-secondary education. Many roundtable participants concurred that investing in education improvements for Aboriginal learners presents a rare public policy opportunity. According to Dr. Sharpe, "it has a dynamic effect and it's a low-hanging fruit. By investing in Aboriginal education, all of society benefits." However, researchers also need to exercise caution in terms of communicating the scope of the challenge to be overcome in closing gaps in education quality and outcomes.

The roundtable participants highlighted the Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) program as an example of a locally controlled project that improves the lives of Aboriginal youth. In 1995, the federal government launched the AHS, a community-based half-day preschool program that emphasizes culture and language, school readiness, health and nutrition, social support, and family involvement. In 2001, over 7,000 First Nations children living on reserves and 3,000 off-reserve First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children participated in an AHS program. Some participants pointed out that there is need for further research on AHS outcomes.

Promising approaches

The roundtable discussion revealed several ideas and options that participants suggested may provide new ways to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal youth. These include:

- Creating an educational climate that will encourage Aboriginal youth to take an interest in learning. Mentoring and role models can provide powerful examples of real success and can encourage youth to stay in school and facilitate their transitions into the workforce.
- Networking with First Nations colleges and universities in order to explore their research findings and their solutions to the problems.
- Building on the proficiency of Aboriginal youth in new technologies through e-learning and web sites.

- Creating and using personal portfolios to follow youth throughout their schooling so that they can have more individualized but consistent learning plans. Aboriginal people have higher rates of mobility and changing schools negatively affects their educational outcomes. A personal portfolio could help to ensure that there is continuity in their education. It would also help youth build on their individual strengths and bring them closer to their own goals and aspirations.
- Language and culture cannot be separated from education. For youth to succeed, traditional languages need to be included in daily instruction and the provincial curriculum needs to provide room for traditional teachings.

Future directions for research

Experts agree that there is much more to be learned about Aboriginal students and how they are doing throughout their educational trajectory. Performance data on Aboriginal children in provincially run schools located off-reserve (attended by most Métis, Inuit, and First Nations students living off-reserve, and approximately a third of those residing on-reserve) and in federally operated schools on reserve would allow researchers to track how Aboriginal youth are faring in the system.

In order to understand what contributes to Aboriginal students' successes, the roundtable participants recommended getting a better understanding of what motivates youth in post-secondary institutions, their future plans, and the reasons they persisted with their studies. In cases where the youth leave PSE, the participants suggested finding out why in order to be able to find and effectively use the levers that can increase participation and completion rates among Aboriginal youth. Gender differences in terms of educational outcomes also merit analysis.

There also continues to be a gap with regard to the area of labour force studies in specific regions where known issues exist. Roundtable participants reflected on the need to ease the transition of Aboriginal youth into post-secondary education and/or training and then into employment. According to roundtable participant Mr. Jeremy Hull, "there needs to be research that looks at these issues demographically and from a place-based approach."

Researchers from the Centre for Health Policy at the University of Manitoba and the Institute for Research on Public Policy have published population-based research findings on educational outcomes in Manitoba and compared these results with school-based achievement test results for students in Manitoba. The researchers point out that although school-based testing and surveys have merit in some areas, they do not include those who are most in need of policy interventions: children who have fallen behind in the school system or who have dropped out entirely. For further information, refer to <<http://www.irpp.org/choices/archive/vol12no5.pdf>>

(Submitted by Mr. Jeremy Hull)

B. Family and Community Well-Being

Issue

Aboriginal families and communities offer physical, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual resources to youth as they go through important transitions. However, young people growing up in disadvantaged communities face higher risks of violence, fewer family resources, increasing rates of alcohol and drug addiction, and, most tragically, alarming suicide rates. Effective interventions in the more troubled communities need to be identified in order to improve family resources and support.

Context

In developmental terms, major youth transitions (for example, leaving the parental home, moving into employment or post-secondary education, getting married, or becoming a parent) have been represented as periods of vulnerability and/or opportunity when much of an individual's life is in flux. Families, groups, and communities provide young people with support during these transitions in the form of extra attention, rituals, activities, or structured experiences to support successful transitions. Although there are several successful cases of positive social and economic transformation in Aboriginal communities, heartening instances of community healing, and exemplary experiences of individual and collective empowerment (Ponting and Voyageur 2005; Wuttunee 2004), statistical trends show that Aboriginal youth are more and more likely to live in lone-parent families, just as they are more likely to be part of a stepfamily or to live with a grandparent (with no parent present). Aboriginal people in Canada are also noted for having particularly early transitions in establishing their own households and relationships and for higher levels of teenage fertility (Beaujot 2007; Guimond 2008).

In 2006, while the majority of Aboriginal children aged 14 and under lived with both parents, close to a third lived with a lone mother (see Table 1).⁶ This contrasts to the situation among the non-Aboriginal population, where four in five lived with two parents and only 14% lived in single-parent households. Aboriginal children are also twice as likely as non-Aboriginal children to live in multiple-family households.

Table 1 Living Arrangements of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children Aged 14 Years and Under, Canada, 2006		
Living arrangements of children	Aboriginal population	Non-Aboriginal population
	Percentage	
Living with two parents	58	82
Living with a lone mother	29	14
Living with a lone father	6	3
Total: living with at least one parent	93	99
Living with a grandparent (no parent present)	3	0.4
Living with another relative	4	0.5
Living with non-relatives	0.4	0.2
Total: Children aged 14 years and under	100	100

** Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2006*

In a context where much is to be gained for youth who can rely on longer periods of support from parents, both in terms of financial and human capital investments, the question that surfaces is the extent to which many more Aboriginal youth are losing out on these supports, given the greater rates of poverty and lone-parenthood and their propensity to leave the parental home as teenagers. In certain contexts, early home-leaving has been linked with lower educational attainment and less successful employment patterns (Beaujot 2007).

Looking forward

During the roundtable discussion, Dr. Michael Chandler discussed the polarities observed in his research of youth suicide rates in British Columbia communities. In their studies of First Nations, he and Dr. Christopher Lalonde noted that while the overall rate of suicide of Aboriginal youth in B.C. is very high, 90 percent of those suicides happen in only 10 percent of the communities. By contrast, in more than half of the communities they studied, there hasn't been a suicide for over 15 years. Dr. Chandler advised that there is an important lesson to be learned from this: by painting all Aboriginal people with the same brush, problems may be underfunded where they are most prevalent and overfunded where the problem doesn't exist. He observed that the same thing likely happens with regard to early school leaving. He noted the importance of identifying where problems are occurring and then targeting efforts accordingly.

Dr. Chandler continued by exploring what distinguishes the communities that are doing well. He referred to his research with Dr. Lalonde, suggesting that communities that are successful have a connection to their traditional past as well as to their future ("cultural continuity"). Some important factors that contribute to a community's well-being are self-government, control over education and health care delivery, cultural preservation, and language teaching. First Nations that had these elements had both low (or zero) suicide rates and low school drop-out rates.

Policy implications

Youth is an optimal time to provide extra support to Aboriginal people as they build their foundation for the future. Unfortunately for youth in communities or families that are not faring well, there are limited support systems to help them through what can be for many a difficult transition to adulthood. According to the roundtable participants, there is a need to closely examine programs for youth and ensure that support (through program funding, service delivery, and income support) is not cut off once these youth turn 18. Participants said that the lack of support for those who are most vulnerable stands in stark contrast to the extensive support provided to the best situated, most-likely-to-succeed young adults. Creating a comprehensive system to strengthen Indigenous families and communities is complex. The underlying causes of dysfunction are not always well understood. The problems are deeply entrenched, the solutions are often uncertain, and the population is diverse. Different youth face different barriers. The fact that many of these youth at risk are concentrated in highly disorganized urban neighbourhoods or live in remote areas with little access to services exacerbates the problem of enabling communities to provide support to their youth. Dr. Chandler likened youth suicide to the canary in the mineshaft: communities in which youth don't consider life worth living are communities that are unwell. It is unfortunate that those who are most at risk are the ones who do not have access to support.

This kind of family and community dysfunction constitutes what policy analysts term a “wicked” problem. Here “wicked” is used not in an ethically deplorable sense, but in the sense that these types of issues present us with especially difficult challenges. However, when it comes to effective responses to Aboriginal family and community issues, there is much hesitation, not just because policy makers do not yet know with much certainty which policy levers to pull and in which order or combination but also because of the legacy of past policies that have since been recognized as “paternalistic” or “intrusive.”

Promising approaches

Dr. Chandler observed that valuable insights can be gained from communities that are working well. Communities that have school drop-out rates equal to the rest of the country have figured out what works and the lessons that can be gleaned from their experiences can be shared among communities. Much could be gained by creating opportunities for lateral transfers of knowledge from communities that have been successful and are finding solutions to overcoming adversity.

Future directions for research

- **Indigenous family formation, fatherhood, and parents in general:** There are calls from the family violence, correctional and Aboriginal child welfare sectors that are trying to get support for father outreach. Many initiatives are trying to strengthen father involvement. In non-Aboriginal settings, research shows that positive father involvement is linked to lower suicide and injury rates, fewer mental health problems, stronger school engagement and lower incarceration rates, among other benefits. Father

involvement is not only good for children it is also good for fathers. For this reason, roundtable participants recommended documenting innovative practices, positive fatherhood role models, and supporting young fathers to be positively involved with their partners and young children.

- **Identify “Centres of Knowledge” and examine the distinguishing features of the communities that are doing well.** Participants agreed that mechanisms for tracking successes are critical to brokering solutions and facilitating lateral transfers of knowledge from communities that are inherently successful to communities that are experiencing dysfunction. Some communities and Aboriginal organizations have evidence-based knowledge. They are “Centres of Knowledge” and can provide solutions that are adapted to Aboriginal realities. Moving this knowledge to where it’s needed is not simple and requires innovative approaches. Participants also cautioned that successful communities are often overstretched and underresourced, so it can be difficult to ask them to redirect valuable resources of time, money, and people to share their knowledge.
- Another challenge is that of **identifying promising practices**: sometimes successful outcomes go unrecognized because they are unanticipated; in other cases, the communities are hesitant to admit that they have had successes. Participants observed that Aboriginal organizations are sometimes afraid to talk about positive outcomes if they don’t come in the expected form or if the method of achieving the desired outcome does not conform to the prescribed process. This highlights the need to have a trusting relationship that allows for innovative solutions to local problems that might not fit the prescribed standards.
- **Taking a holistic approach:** Successful anti-poverty strategies are built on different pieces fitting together as a coherent system. Roundtable participants discussed the limits to addressing issues that affect Aboriginal people if the analysis does not take a holistic perspective. From a research perspective, they suggested reviewing current theoretical frameworks. Rather than focusing on the clash between traditional and modern societies, the focus should be on the intergenerational changes resulting from broader emerging conditions.

C. Criminal Justice

Issue

Due to a complex mix of socio-economic factors, Aboriginal youth are more likely than their non-Aboriginal peers to be victims of crime and also to be arrested and incarcerated for crime. Given demographic trends (and without policy intervention), not only will Aboriginal youth – males in particular – be dramatically overrepresented in the Canadian criminal justice system but it will become the norm for them to have a criminal conviction. The potential consequences for Canada's Aboriginal communities, for its justice system, and for its commitment to public safety and social cohesion are serious.

Context

Restricted opportunities and uncertain futures for youth with low socio-economic status create a fertile ground for criminality and foster a sense of danger and despair among those who experience these conditions. Although families can create “buffer zones” or “scaffolding” to help protect youth, the literature suggests that the following social conditions are typically experienced in communities under stress: low levels of trust, high levels of anxiety, low levels of social control, disorganization, unpredictability, and frequent mobility.

Looking forward

Studies commissioned by the Department of Justice indicate that while there have been substantial reductions in the number of Aboriginal youth in custody since 2000 Aboriginal youth continue to experience an appreciably higher incarceration rate compared with non-Aboriginal youth. Using a “snapshot method”⁷ to determine precise incarceration rates for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth in Canada, a report issued in 2003 found that the incarceration rate of Aboriginal youth was 64.5 per 10,000 population while the incarceration rate for non-Aboriginal youth was 8.2 per 10,000 population. In other words, Aboriginal youth were almost eight times more likely to be in custody than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

The high incarceration rate of Aboriginal youth is likely related to a series of interrelated factors. High rates of poverty, substance abuse, and victimization can lead to family breakdown and serious criminal behaviour at a young age. According to a study by Latimer in 2004, possible discrimination within the youth criminal justice system may also lead to the differential treatment of Aboriginal youth. This same study showed that Aboriginal youth were more likely to be on remand for some of the more serious offences and that the median sentence for Aboriginal youth in custody was 212 days while the median sentence for non-Aboriginal youth in custody was 182 days.⁸

Policy implications

Bill C-2, the *Tackling Violent Crimes Act*, which received Royal Assent in February 2008, amended the *Criminal Code* by, among other things, increasing mandatory minimum sentences for firearms offences. At the roundtable event, Ms. Michelle Mann cautioned that mandatory minimum sentences will disproportionately affect Aboriginal offenders and Aboriginal youth in particular, exacerbating the overincarceration of Aboriginal people. She also cautioned that studies show that lengthy prison sentences do not on their own deter youth from committing crimes. She advised that the impact of Bill C-2 should be carefully analyzed to determine its impact upon Aboriginal people. Ms. Mann concluded by voicing her concern that Bill C-2 could increase the prison population overall and further strain the capacity of the federal government to provide programming to federal offenders, particularly programs targeting the reinsertion of Aboriginal prisoners into the community.

Promising approaches

Dr. Raymond Corrado spoke about the importance of breaking the intergenerational cycle of violence. Current research suggests that fetal problems play a critical role in determining the violent tendencies of youth, yet very little is being done with regard to intervention before and during pregnancy and throughout the toddler years (ages 1 to 3). Dr. Corrado advised that there is a need to act in a systematic and coordinated manner to ensure early diagnosis and adequate care during early childhood. If early child care, nutrition, and environment are adequate, a child dealing with the effects of fetal problems can make significant advances in his or her neurological development. In particular, many difficulties associated with youth who have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder result from a lack of early diagnosis and inadequate care during early childhood. By studying the links between fetal issues and family patterns and focusing on mothers at risk, we can target interventions before and during pregnancy. One strategy proposed by Dr. Corrado would be to earmark funds so that every Aboriginal mother receives regular home-nurse visits to ensure healthy pregnancy and fetal development.

Future directions for research

- **Track the success rates of Aboriginal community programming to aid reintegration into the community:** The period following release from a correctional facility has been identified as a crucial time for the provision of integrated health and social services to break the cycle of incarceration. What are the success rates of the various community and government programs offered to young offenders after their release? What are the best practices and promising approaches to promote social inclusion, family and community integration, skills development, and employment? One participant advised that the continuum of services at the provincial and federal levels needs to be examined, with particular attention paid to rehabilitation services offered in prison as well as aftercare.
- **Study the social and economic implications of higher rates of incarceration:** What are the impacts of the higher rates of incarceration experienced by Aboriginal people? Does this affect the health and well-being of Aboriginal communities and society as a whole? What does it achieve in terms of community safety?
- **Focus on crime prevention strategies:** As one participant argued, crime prevention keeps people out of the criminal justice system and provides the “best bang for your buck.” However, more research and data are needed to determine what is most effective in terms of crime prevention.

II. Reflecting on the Process: Successful Approaches to Research and Policy Development

While the main focus of the roundtable was to identify priority issues facing Aboriginal youth, a significant part of the discussion during the half-day event centred on ways to improve research practices and policy development by making them more collaborative and inclusive. Roundtable participants expressed the need for both research and policy making to recognize the value of traditional knowledge and they encouraged a stronger shift away from research on and about Aboriginal people to one done with, by, and for them.

A. Recommendations for Research

Improving data quality: Effective policy research in the realm of Aboriginal issues continues to be hampered by significant data gaps, particularly in fields such as education and health. In a context where policy makers are increasingly required to demonstrate effectiveness and value for money as a prerequisite to securing investment in new policy initiatives, addressing these gaps through greater investment, collaboration among stakeholders, and enhanced administrative data collection practices is essential.

Using a positive approach: The roundtable participants emphasized the importance of investigating successful practices and doing research that is focused on strengths and success. By objectively evaluating and understanding what is working in communities and why it is working, research will be better positioned to support sound policy making and program implementation.

Research ethics: Ethics are a critical issue in Aboriginal research. Many of the participants expressed the view that ethical research in Aboriginal communities goes hand-in-hand with lateral knowledge transfer. Dr. Marlene Brant Castellano referenced the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Research Involving Humans* (2005), which describes the standards and procedures governing research on people. She also said that engaging people from the community in identifying problems and designing solutions and having an ethical research protocol at the outset will encourage mutuality of learning and contribute to building the community's capacity to do effective research. "From that perspective, you're moving from knowledge translation to mutual learning. You don't have to worry about knowledge transfer anymore," she stated. Experts also emphasized that how information is gathered, i.e., the research process itself, is important. It is difficult to build trust in short-term research collaborations. Time is required to involve people and develop meaningful research and real knowledge exchange.

Develop Aboriginal research capacity: To help young Aboriginal researchers develop and thrive, one avenue suggested by Dr. Pauline Tremblay is to network with First Nations' universities. Ms. Sheila Regehr also suggested the need to build

capacity at the ground level by sharing what works and what doesn't. Encouraging young Aboriginal scholars is key to building this capacity.

What's old is new again: In her retrospective synthesis of 50 years of research practice, Dr. Brant Castellano reminded the roundtable participants that potential solutions are often embedded in old knowledge: "The need to recognize the diversity within and between Aboriginal peoples, for example, is not new. Differences can be described on a spectrum: First Nations/Inuit/Métis, from an intergenerational perspective, or by comparing traditional to contemporary living. Aboriginal policy research has often concluded on the local nature of solution-generation. It is the people of Davis Inlet, and the Siksika who know what resources exist in their communities and what 'hooks' exist to pull themselves out of their problems. These hooks will collapse if they are not local. Issues in educational achievement call for the same reasoning. Already in 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommended that if you put the resources into the community level, the fit between programs and needs and resilience will happen."

B. Recommendations for Policy

Given the complexity and the interdependence of the issues facing Aboriginal youth, roundtable participants expressed the clear need to approach the issues holistically and horizontally across different sectors. In policy literature, these issues have been classified as "wicked" problems, due to their complexity. Wicked problems, according to Rittel and Webber (1973), who first coined the concept, are the result of a complex set of interrelated issues and are shaped by constraints that change over time. A problem is "wicked" when its nature is hard to define and its causes can be explained in numerous ways. The authors agree that every wicked problem is essentially unique, with no precedents for solutions that can be applied. A second key characteristic is the diverse range of interests involved, which are often based in communities located in different geographical places. The presence of many vested interests with various and changing ideas about how to define the problem, what might be causing it, and how to resolve it adds enormous complexity to any efforts to find a solution. With their inherent complexity, these problems are resistant to traditional "silo-ed" interventions designed and delivered from the top down by individual government departments. What is required instead are decentralized, community, and place-sensitive modes of policy intervention: strategies constructed with the knowledge of the particular circumstances in communities and delivered through collaborations crossing functional boundaries.

Dr. Michael DeGagné advised that there is a need to build the relationships between communities and the government, and especially to build mechanisms to put content expertise in the hands of Aboriginal organizations. Government would benefit from getting to know the communities and their needs better. This would help to ensure that the proper processes are in place to better serve them.

A community or place-based policy approach entails developing mechanisms that enable policy makers to learn from local knowledge held by community residents and their networks (Bradford 2002; Hay 2005). It is in the local setting that many problems originate. It is also the place where innovative solutions can be found. A community or place-based approach to Aboriginal policy involves attention to scale and the variations of local experience. The nature of social risks varies from community to community and often from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Attention to community and to place is a means of harnessing both local capacity and knowledge in a way that recognizes the role that communities play in securing the well-being of their members. Without attention to communities and place there is a danger of developing a one-size-fits-all approach to Aboriginal issues that risks meeting no one's needs. Sustainable solutions to today's wicked problems require the combined insights and efforts of multiple actors learning about what works in particular places, and how to make it happen "on the ground."

Government policy makers are increasingly called on to play a dual role, acting as technical experts in substantive policy matters and as facilitators of or participants in community-driven learning, planning, and action. Their most important role might be that of knowledge broker. The locally engaged civil servant mediates between government expectations, departmental protocols, and community practices, generating new opportunities for dialogue where more distant bureaucracies cannot connect. Policy development can become "a two-way translation process" that involves "on the one hand breaking down and re-working formal research so that it can be applied to specific practical contexts and, on the other, articulating the practitioner insights and know-how so that these can be shared as formal knowledge" (Leviten-Reid 2004, 8, in Bradford 2005).

Engaging local knowledge and investing in community capacity were the two strongest recommendations made by roundtable participants. They also emphasized the importance of working holistically and targeting support where it is most needed. For this to happen, coordinating government policies at all levels and tailoring programs to the conditions prevailing in particular communities and places are key.

Conclusion

Over the course of the half-day roundtable event, participants discussed themes of educational achievement, family and community well-being, and criminal justice, explaining the benefits of policy development for Aboriginal youth in each of these areas. They addressed not only the “what” of the issue, but also “how” to ethically research issues and develop sound policies that can be implemented through relevant programs.

In addition to the emerging issues, a number of key messages surfaced repeatedly throughout the dialogue:

- 1) Consider the rich diversity of Canada’s Aboriginal populations in research, policy, and service delivery.
- 2) Take a strengths-based approach. Track successes and celebrate what is working. There is much to be learned from positive examples. Identify what works at the individual and the community level and disseminate ideas for promising practices.
- 3) Recognize the value of Indigenous knowledge. Openness to other forms of knowledge, cultural competence, and understanding the importance of social factors are crucial for research to be policy-relevant and for policies to be effective.
- 4) Engage First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth in finding the answers. Ensure that these youth have a voice in developing meaningful solutions.

In order to begin to make a difference, policies need to be community- and place-based and developed in relation with the communities that are affected, in a process that allows policy makers to tap into local capacity and local knowledge. The developed policies and programs need to be holistic and targeted to where they are most needed.

There is an ongoing interest from the PRI and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada to explore the issues raised by the roundtable participants, who openly and generously collaborated and shared their expertise with policy makers, peers, and new generations of leadership.

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Annex 1 – Agenda

Expert Roundtable Emerging Issues, Policy, and Research Challenges Related to Aboriginal Youth

- What do we know about the changing realities of young Aboriginals' lives in Canada today?
- What are the continuing and emerging issues, prospects, and challenges that some Aboriginal youth face or will likely be facing in the near future?
- How can a horizontal, multidisciplinary, and forward-looking approach help address some of the policy challenges?
- What policy and research gaps need to be addressed?

Monday, March 17, 2008 from 11:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Holiday Inn Plaza de la Chaudière, Nation A, 2nd Floor
2 Montcalm Street, Gatineau (Québec)

This half-day experts' roundtable is being held in order to examine the policy and research implications of a rapidly growing and young Aboriginal population in an aging Canadian population. The event is being organized by the Policy Research Initiative (PRI) in partnership with the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and in consultation with five other departments*. It's being undertaken as part of the current PRI horizontal project *Investing in Youth: Evidence from Policy, Practice and Research* and supports a key objective: "to examine the changing realities, issues and challenges of today's youth and implications for public policy."

A first step in the examination of recent research related to Aboriginal youth has led to the publication of a special volume of *Horizons* entitled "*Hope or Heartbreak: Young Aboriginals and Canada's Future*" (March 2008). The objectives of this roundtable are to build from the previous exercise and further examine some of the key emerging concerns facing young Aboriginals in Canada and related policy and research challenges for medium-term planning.

Forty participants, including senior Government representatives, Aboriginal research experts, youth research experts, community leaders and practitioners, will engage in this multidisciplinary dialogue. From their own reflections, experiences and research work, they will be invited to:

- identify pressures, key trends and emerging issues facing Aboriginal youth in the near (5 to 7 year) future;
- outline what policy and research gaps need to be addressed to meet those key challenges;
- identify new and/or promising approaches to close policy and knowledge gaps related to Aboriginal youth.



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In the first part of the agenda, a panel of experts will have 5 minutes each to speak to a specific theme. A semi-structured roundtable discussion will follow to address the policy and research challenges.

**Human Resources and Social Development Canada, Health Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada, Statistics Canada and Social Sciences Humanities Research Council*



Agenda

- 11:30 – 11:50** **Welcome and Introductions**
- 11:50 – 12:30** **Expert Panel (1) on the Pressures, Key Trends and Emerging Issues Facing Aboriginal Youth: Lessons from Practice and Research**
- Michelle Mann, *Consultant*
 - Ray Corrado, *BC Centre for Social Responsibility*
 - Andrew Sharpe, *Centre for the Study of Living Standards*
 - Carole Lévesque, *DLIALOG, Le réseau québécois d'échange sur les questions autochtones*
 - Daphne Crowchief McHugh, *Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre*
 - Roberta Jamieson, *National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation*
- 12:30 – 1:00** **Policy Response from Senior Federal Representatives**
- 1:00 – 1:30** **Working Lunch (Buffet)**
- 1:30 – 2:15** **Expert Panel (2) on the Pressures, Key Trends and Emerging Issues Facing Aboriginal Youth: Lessons from Practice and Research**
- Michael Chandler, *University of British Columbia*
 - Paulette Tremblay, *National Aboriginal Health Organization*
 - Michael DeGagné, *Aboriginal Healing Foundation*
 - Marlene Brant Castellano, *Trent University*
- 2:15 – 2:45** **Policy Response from Senior Federal Representatives**
- 2:45 – 3:00** **Health Break**
- 3:00 – 4:15** **Roundtable Discussion on Key Policy and Research Challenges and New and/or Promising Approaches to Address Priority Issues**
- 4:15 – 4:30** **Concluding Remarks**



Annex 2 – List of Participants

Name	Organization
Ms. Barbara Anderson	Finance Canada / Assistant Deputy Minister, Federal-Provincial Relations and Social Policy Branch
Dr. Jessica Ball	University of Victoria / Professor, School of Child and Youth Care
Dr. Daniel Beavon	Indian and Northern Affairs Canada / Director, Research and Analysis
Mr. Michel Blondin	Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation / Manager, Aboriginal Housing Policy
Mr. Jean-Pierre Bourdeau	Canadian Heritage / Research Manager, Policy and Research Directorate
Dr. Marlene Brant Castellano	Trent University / Professor Emerita, Officer of the Order of Canada
Mr. Fred Caron	Indian and Northern Affairs Canada / Assistant Deputy Minister, Office of the Federal Interlocutor
Dr. Michael Chandler	University of British Columbia / Professor, Department of Psychology
Dr. Raymond Corrado	Simon Fraser University / Professor and BC Centre for Social Responsibility / Director
Ms. Daphne Crowchief McHugh	Siksika Board of Education / Superintendent
Dr. Michael DeGagné	Aboriginal Healing Foundation / Executive Director
Mr. Frank Fedyk	Human Resources and Social Development Canada / Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Research
Ms. Leah Fleetwood	Human Resources and Social Development Canada / Senior Policy Analyst
Ms. Sandra Franke	Policy Research Initiative / Senior Policy Research Officer, Investing in Youth Project
Dr. Eric Guimond	University of Western Ontario / Adjunct Research Professor and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada / Senior Research Manager, Research and Analysis Directorate
Mr. Ross Holden	Natural Resources Canada / Senior Policy Advisor, Aboriginal and Northern Affairs
Mr. Jeremy Hull	Prologica Research / Independent Consultant
Ms. Roberta Jamieson	National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation / President
Mr. Danny Jetté	Indian and Northern Affairs Canada / Research Manager, Research and Analysis Directorate
Ms. Geneviève Kroes	Policy Research Initiative / Senior Policy Research Officer, Investing in Youth Project



Dr. Christopher Lalonde	<i>University of Victoria</i> / Associate Professor, Department of Psychology
Mr. Clinton Lawrence-Whyte	<i>Western Economic Diversification Canada</i> / Director, Strategic Policy and Advocacy
Dr. Carole Lévesque	<i>DIALOG</i> /Director, Réseau québécois d'échange sur les questions autochtones
Mr. Alfred MacLeod	<i>Privy Council Office</i> / Assistant Deputy Minister, Intergovernmental Policy
Ms. Michelle Mann	Independent Consultant
Dr. Sharon Manson Singer	<i>Canadian Policy Research Networks</i> / President
Dr. Marc Molgat	<i>Policy Research Initiative/ Visiting Scholar</i> and <i>University of Ottawa</i> / Professor, School of Social Services
Ms. Aideen Nabigon	<i>Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada</i> / Director General, Policy, Partnership and Communication
Ms. Sheila Regehr	<i>National Council of Welfare</i> / Research Director
Ms. Jennifer Robson	<i>Policy Research Initiative</i> / Acting Project Director, Investing in Youth
Dr. Andrew Sharpe	<i>Centre for the Study of Living Standards</i> / Executive Director
Ms. Katherine Stewart	<i>Health Canada</i> / Director General, Strategic Policy Planning and Analysis
Mr. Thomas Townsend	<i>Policy Research Initiative</i> / Executive Head
Dr. Paulette Tremblay	<i>National Aboriginal Health Organization</i> / Chief Executive Officer
Ms. Solange van Kemenade	<i>Public Health Agency of Canada</i> / Senior Policy Research Analyst, Policy Research Division



Notes

¹ Due to the short duration of this event, each speaker had only a few minutes to elaborate on what they perceived to be the key issues. In order to frame the discussion, this report provides context based on existing literature. Every attempt was made to respect the tenor of the discussion that occurred at the roundtable.

² Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population. The figures in this section are for all adult age groups. At the time of writing, 2006 data on youth (15 to 34) living on-reserve was not available.

³ For an analysis of educational achievement based on 2001 Census data, see D. Beavon (2008).

⁴ Due to rounding, the component percentages do not add up precisely to the total.

⁵ Because of changes in the questions asked, comparisons between 2006 and 2001 are only possible for university degrees. Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 and 2006 Census of Population.

⁶ This situation is very similar to that observed in 2001.

⁷ A snapshot of youth in custody counts the number of individuals in each facility on a particular day. While this method provides accurate incarceration rates on a given day, its results cannot be generalized. For example, it does not necessarily reflect average custody counts given that admission rates can vary during the year.

⁸ As indicated in Latimer's 2004 study, this comparison does not control for two of the more important factors typically considered in sentencing: criminal history and the severity of the offence.