Native Women's Association of Canada

L'Association des femmes autochtones du Canada

Poverty Reduction Strategy:

The Native Women's Association of Canada Engagement Results

Head Office
155 International Road Unit #2
Akwesasne, Ontario K6H 5R7
Toll-free: 1-800-461-4043

Satellite Office
1 Nicholas Street, 9th Floor
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B7
Tel: (613) 722-3033 | Fax: (613) 722-7687
Toll-free: 1-800-461-4043 reception@nwac.ca

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This paper was prepared by the Native Women's Association of Canada's Justice and Human Rights Department in the Fall of 2017.

INDIGENOUS WOMEN, CULTURE, AND POVERTY REDUCTION

Indigenous women are more likely to experience poverty because of the dominance of colonial systems and the continuation of societal discrimination based not only on race and gender, but also on class and culture.

Social, political, and economic marginalization of Indigenous women limits access to necessary and appropriate supports and services that reduce the impacts of poverty. The most successful methods of combatting poverty are empowering women through increased employment, access to education, access to health care, protection of cultural practices, and socio-economic autonomy.

The adverse conditions of colonization and the current paternalistic top down government approaches have created an environment where Indigenous women are politically disenfranchised and economically marginalized. This means Indigenous women are excluded from decision-making positions and forced into financially vulnerable positions which poses further challenges to economic and social development.

"The existing Indian industry is a system which career 'professionals' perpetuate the 'managing' of Indigenous people's misery"

– Survey participant

Connecting Culture and Poverty Reduction

Culture is a human right that has long been obstructed for Indigenous people because of assimilation policies developed by the Canadian government.

Decades of research around the world has proven an important connection between access to culture and poverty reduction. Poverty is much more than lacking a steady or sufficient source of income. Poverty, especially for Indigenous women, means being vulnerable: to violence, to the lack of autonomy and access to services. Poverty is social disconnection, which is why cultural identity and social inclusion are absolutely necessary to poverty reduction.

Increasing access to cultural activities and identity promotes social and economic wellbeing by improving self-confidence and building identity. Moreover, increased participation in society and the labour market is imperative to fostering growth, especially for those who face additional barriers such as Indigenous women who have a disability or Indigenous LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people. This means increasing access to culture will increase social inclusion and economic security through appropriate employment and social services.

Indigenous women face a lack of appropriate cultural services and support mechanisms to respond to their needs. Additionally, some women are reluctant or unable to use services outside Indigenous services because of fear, lack of experience, or past traumas. In an Indigenous context, poverty is a deterioration of social connectedness, which is why social solidarity and cultural identity are imperative to poverty reduction in First Nation, Inuit, and Métis communities.

"Some of the women will come with different traumas and if they have no one to talk about it, their success rate will not be as good. They need someone they can trust."

– Winnipeg engagement participant

KEY MESSAGES

Poverty exacerbates violence perpetuated against Indigenous women

- Women move to the cities to escape violence, or to seek employment and can end up in more threatening situations
- The cycle of poverty is different for Indigenous women who face multiple layers of marginalization
  - Experiences of Indigenous women are worse in support offices and programs
- Housing is unstable
  - Subsidized housing difficult for those fleeing violence
  - Housing prices are increasing making it difficult to access safe and affordable housing
- Need for more reliable and robust data collection
  - Poverty is a complex situation with many intersections and underlying marginalization that plays a part.

SURVEY RESULTS

NWAC collected information from grassroots Indigenous women who shared their unique experiences and needs. Those with lived experience are the experts and must have their voices heard when this strategy is being developed.

This survey was active from mid August to the end of September 2017 with a goal of reaching 100 participants. We received responses from 128 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis participants from all provinces and territories, except the Yukon. Most participants accessed the survey through NWAC's social media websites like Twitter and Facebook.

"There was poverty in my kokums and mushums time, they were in their late 80's, I was 12, for them I saw poverty but I did not know the causes until now."

– Survey participant

Demographics

Basic demographic information was collected from survey participants to provide background information and context for the survey responses. Participants were asked their age, gender, Indigenous identity, place of residence, and level of education.

The majority of participants identified as women between the ages of 30 and 49. Among those who identified as women, two identified as transgender women, and two others as two-spirit individuals.

Figure 1 - Ages

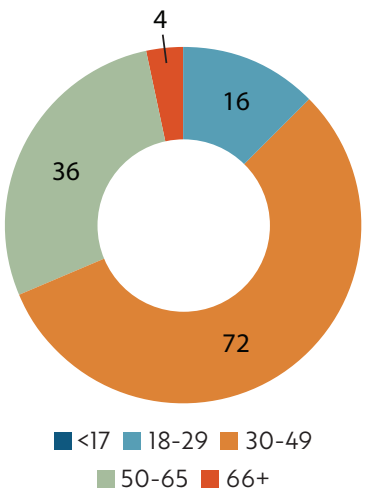


Figure 2 - Gender Identities

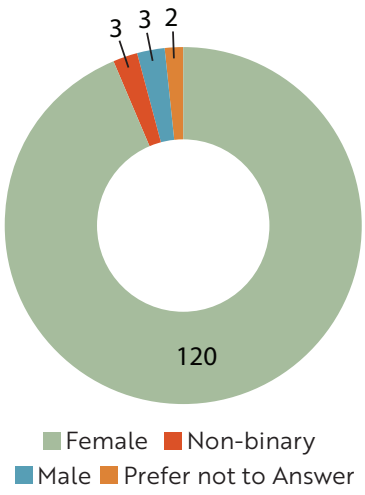


Figure 3 displays the distribution of Indigenous identities. A significant majority of participants identified as status-holding First Nations, while non-status First Nations and Métis women were represented, only one Inuk woman participated. Although participants were able to select multiple identities, only one identity was selected by each participant.

Participants were then asked to disclose details of their place of residence, both population center and province or territory to provide a sense of urban and rural distribution from coast to coast.

Figure 3 - Indigenous Identities

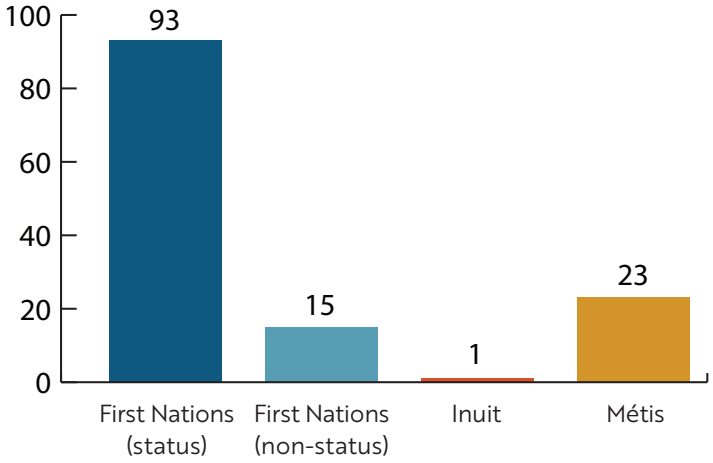


Figure 4 - Place of Residence

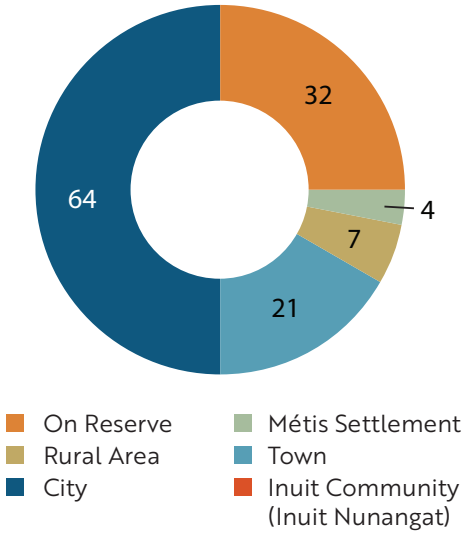


Figure 5 - Provincial Territorial Distribution

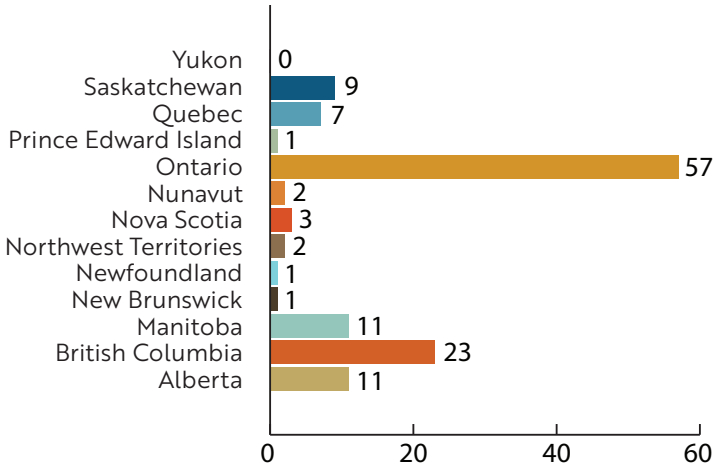
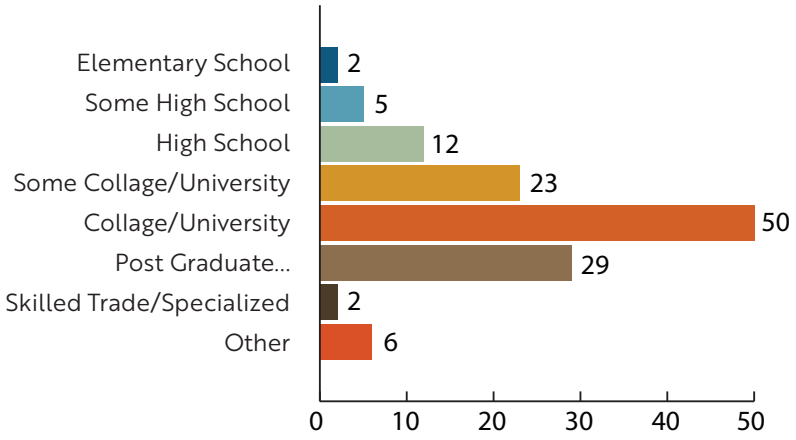


Figure 4 shows that half the participants reside in cities, and a quarter on reserve. Therefore, the feedback received predominantly reflects the experiences of urban Indigenous women and First Nations women on reserve. Furthermore, figure 5 shows a significant majority of participants reside in communities in Ontario, although there was participation from across the country, with the exception of Yukon.

Figure 6 - Levels of Education



A significant majority (84.4%) of participants have completed some college or university, received a diploma or degree, or completed a post-graduate degree or certificate. As anticipated, electronic surveys are more accessible to those with higher educations, which can explain the uneven distribution of education levels. Furthermore, there is a highly educated group of respondents, yet participants strongly note they do not have adequate access to both social services and cultural activities. We can conclude then that it is not only those in extreme poverty that feel financial and social impacts, but also invisible poverty that Indigenous women experience. This includes food insecurity, lack of reliable health care, presence of fear in accessing services, low wages, and social exclusion.

"My goal is to be able to give back to my First Nation People with my skills, knowledge and experience and defend our rights to be able to have access within our lands and reserves [to the] majority of what is available outside them. Nobody should be obliged to move out to have those basics needs fulfilled"

– Christine, survey participant

Housing and Living Situations

Little evidence is available on how housing affects poverty or of how housing can act as a potential route into or out of poverty. However, within Indigenous communities, there is a clear correlation between the prevalence of poverty and adequate and safe housing. Poverty can prevent people from accessing potential housing options, and make others hard to sustain. In the survey, the majority of participants identified having stable forms of housing with 40.6% of participants living in an apartment/rental home, and 27% owning their own homes. Meanwhile, nearly 18% of participants identified living in unstable unhousing such as shelters and/or staying with friends. Other housing situations that were identified include: provincial housing, band housing, subsidized housing, and Indigenous-led cooperative housing.

Figure 7 - Housing

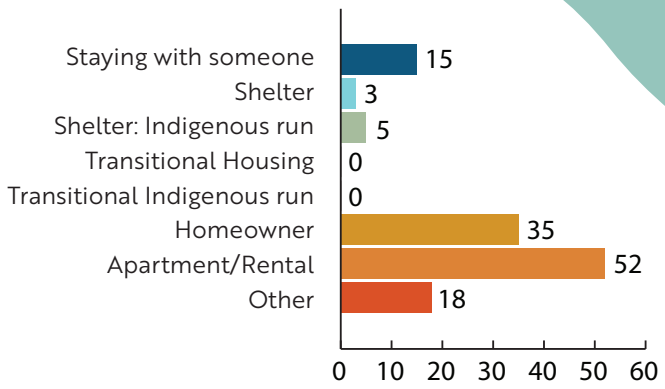


Figure 8 - Number of People Under One Roof

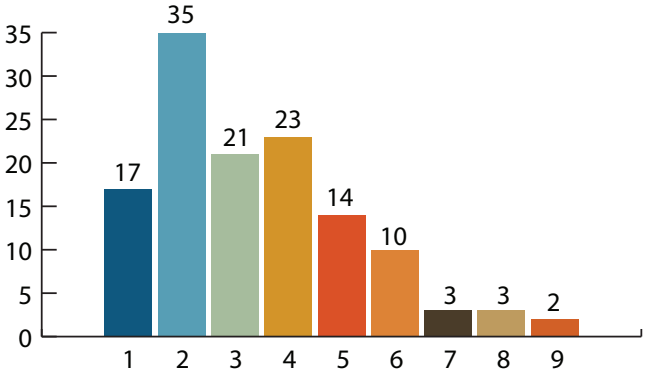
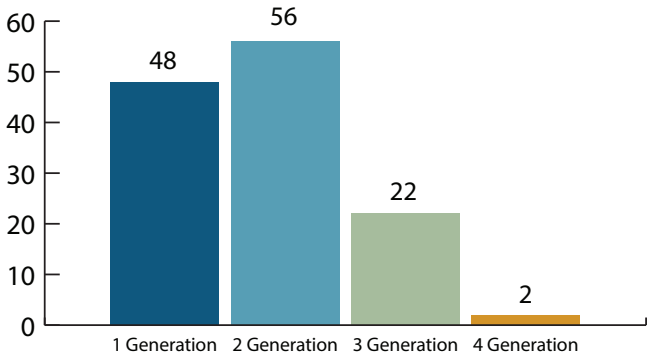


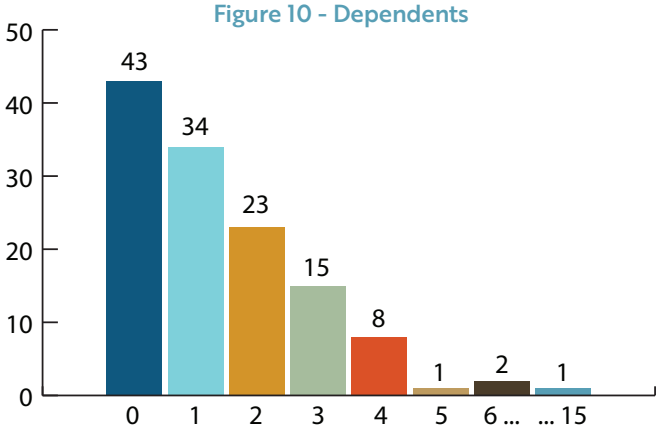
Figure 9 - Generations Under the Same Roof



Figures 8 and 9 above depict the makeup of each household. Figure 8 shows that most households have between two and four habitants, but there are as few as one and as many as nine. On average, those who responded to the survey have 2 generations living under their roof, and, as shown in figure 10, very few dependents. It is important to keep in mind the highly educated women who have responded generally have fewer people living in their households, fewer dependents, and greater stability in their housing. The majority of participants noted they have no dependents or one to three dependents living with them.

Housing can both mitigate and exacerbate the experience of poverty. When there is unstable and overcrowded housing, the impacts of poverty are aggravated. As previously mentioned, Indigenous women are more impacted by poverty because of societal, political and economic discrimination based on class and culture.

Figure 10 - Dependents



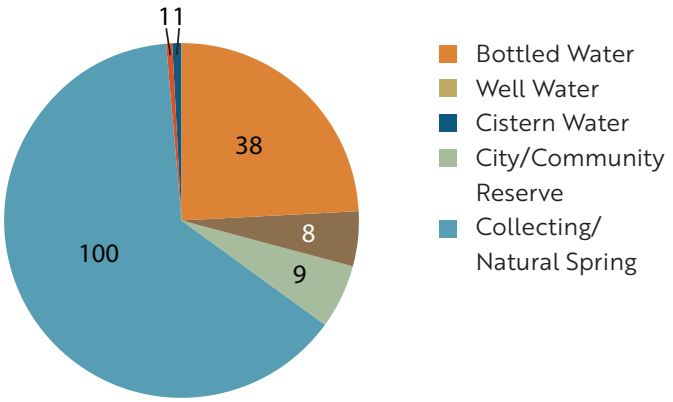
Number of people being taken care of in each household

Access to Culture

Guaranteeing access to and participation in cultural activities for all Indigenous people is an essential dimension of promoting an inclusive mainstream society. Participation in traditional and cultural activities can also be instrumental in helping Indigenous women and their communities to overcome poverty and social exclusion. Culture has been important for Indigenous women, and has been understood by communities as a way to improve their social determinants, such as economic security, or as a tool for inclusion. Mainstream poverty reduction models and strategies have not seen cultural practices in themselves as having a significant impact on an individual's well-being, and therefore have not been invested in as a means of reducing poverty. It is important to remember though, that access to culture is a human right, and not just a tool to achieve other indicator goals. Access to culture should not be dependent on its utility, but on the basis that it is a human right that is continuously denied to Indigenous women.

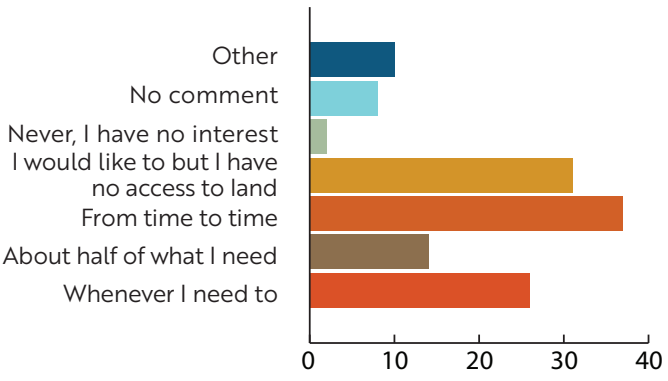
In the survey, participants were asked about their access to culture and ceremony. The definition of culture and ceremony was left up to each participant to decide according to their community specific teachings. Access to water and land are important means of accessing culture because of the connection of Indigenous women's bodies to the environment. Figure 11 shows how most survey participants access water. The majority are accessing city/community water reserves.

Figure 11 - Access to Water



After being asked about access to water, participants were then asked what they needed to increase ceremony practice in their life. Participants were clear that they require access to land for ceremony. Accordingly, participants mentioned needing reliable and affordable transportation to land for ceremony because of the forced displacement of Indigenous people from their traditional territories. Urban individuals mentioned access to culture in the cities can be difficult. For various reasons (sex discrimination in the Indian Act, forced to move for education, lack of housing, etc.) they have had to move away from reserves and settlements into urban centers, distanced from cultural knowledge and supports.

Figure 12 - Access to Ceremony

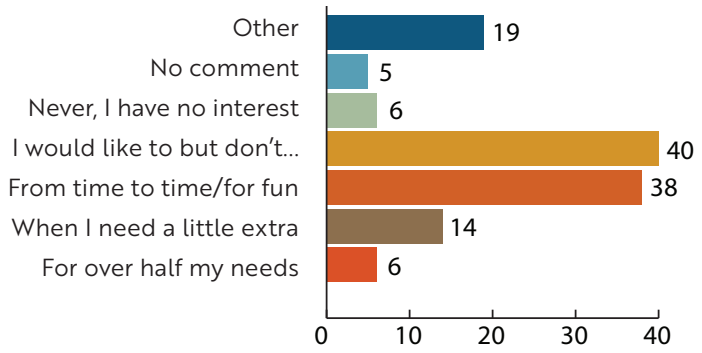


The majority of participants stated a need for increased access to land for ceremony. Land is an important cornerstone for many cultural practices, and participants describe the land as their peoples' "source of identity and spirituality". For Indigenous women, there is no separation between land and bodies, and the physical, mental, and spiritual health of Indigenous women is dependent on the state of the surrounding land. Figure 12 shows that in the survey, thirty-one women identified they would like to access land, but lack access for reasons ranging from transportation costs to the lack of safety of their surroundings.

Similarly, Figure 13 shows a large number of Indigenous women wanting to access land for food sources, but they lack the means. On the other hand, when asked about access to water, nearly every participant responded they had occasional access for ceremony and leisure.

Urban Indigenous women were especially adamant that affordable transportation is essential in accessing culture. Urban centers do not provide ample services that value the importance of traditional knowledge and connection to culture. When Indigenous women in cities use the limited services currently available, they are more likely to experience feelings of social exclusion from colonial systems. This in turn leads to them accessing fewer services and not getting the help, they need.

Figure 13 - Access to Food



"Access and opportunity [to culture] in the city is a challenge compounded by a colonial disconnecting. I need access and opportunity. I need belonging and acceptance as a Métis woman."

– Survey participant

Access to Services

The final portion of the survey focused on access to social services. Past research has demonstrated the extent to which Indigenous women experience more barriers to accessing social services as compared to the Canadian non-Indigenous population. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (and other government studies/reports) details this inequitable service provision for Indigenous people and the colonial and patriarchal barriers in accessing services. Figure 14 shows the percentage of Indigenous women who participated in the survey who have reliable access to each of the listed services. Less than 50% of participants noted they did not have reliable access to ten of the fourteen services listed. Among the services with the least reliable access are: adult day centres, emergency shelters for homelessness, affordable child care, breakfast programs for school-aged children. Participants reported family doctors (69%) as the most reliable, yet 30% reported they did not have reliable access to a family doctor.

Figure 14 - Reliable Access to Services (%)

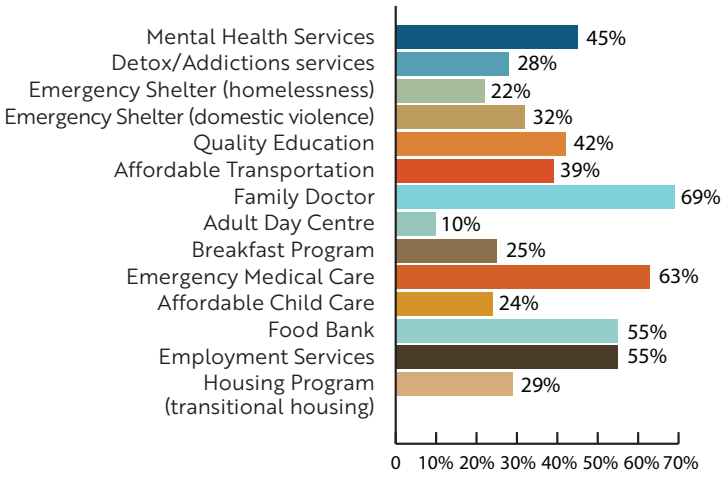
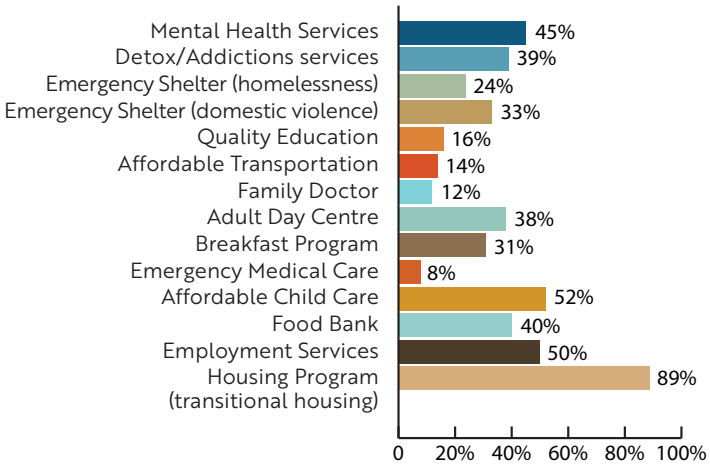


Figure 15 - Indigenous Service Providers (%)



Participants noted there are many services they require, but are unavailable to them, including cultural knowledge. Participants equally mentioned a lack of financial security, where they were generally only able to meet their basic needs, but that this was a struggle. From this we can conclude that Indigenous women who are made financially insecure experience many barriers in accessing services they require. These barriers compound with each other and make it difficult to escape the circle of poverty. For example, one participant noted they were living in food insecurity and wished to supplement their food with harvesting traditional food sources, but they were denied access to the land. This forced her to buy more expensive foods which was financially unsustainable. If she had had access to the land, she believes she would have been able to supplement her food consumption enough to not experience so much financial distress.

Figure 16 - Most Accessible Services

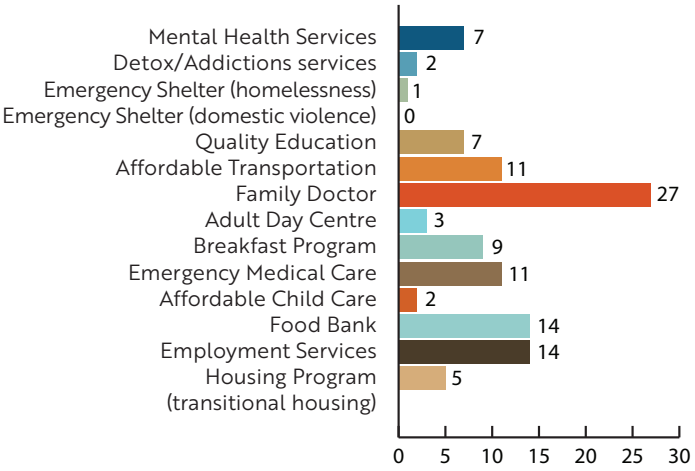
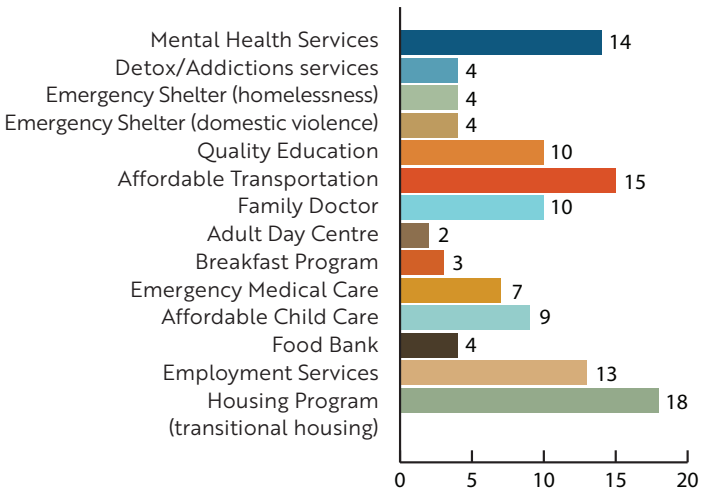


Figure 17 - Least Accessible Services



According to survey participants in Figure 16 (above), a family doctor is considered the most accessible service, even though less than 21% of participants consider it easy to access. When compared to services considered the least accessible (Figure 17), it is evident that a large majority of services are difficult to access. Mental health services, education, transportation, childcare, and transitional housing are among the services with the most accessibility barriers. These services are commonly used, or in high demand, for Indigenous women in both urban and rural settings. Accessing culturally appropriate versions of these services has even more barriers, and is often impossible for those who are systemically and financially marginalized.

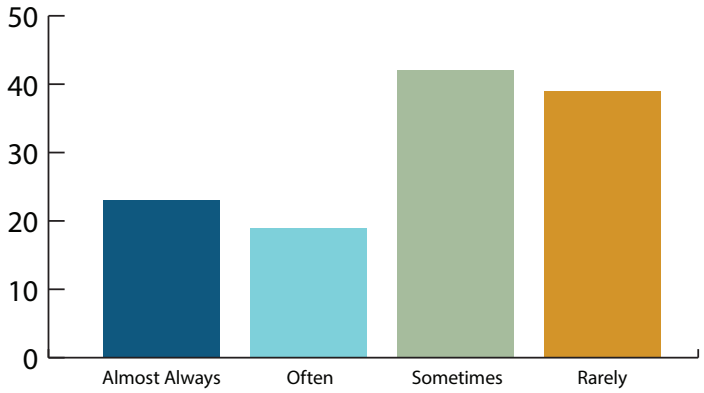
"It isn't enough to say 'we have our own people working for our people' we need to better train them and prepare them for each community's individual issues. [If] we're going to do things we must do them properly or it's all going to just fall apart and we'll still be spinning around on the same wheel we've been on since the initial colonization efforts and successes."

– Survey participant

Furthermore, participants shared which programs and supports they require that are unavailable to them in their communities. For urban Indigenous women, access to Elders and traditional teachers was reported as urgently needed programming, but remains unavailable. Similarly, culturally appropriate health care and child care were noted as lacking in communities from coast to coast. Indigenous women face many layers of discrimination in health care and childcare settings, and when culturally appropriate services are not available, Indigenous women are more vulnerable to violence. More appropriate services must also be available to women who find themselves in vulnerable situations when proactive measures have failed. In these cases, participants noted a need for transitional housing for Indigenous women who are exiting prison systems or addiction and detox treatment centres, and more resource centres specifically for Indigenous women in communities. Tools and supports in these programs are invaluable to assisting Indigenous women in regaining financial and social independence in a safe and dignified way. Indigenous women also stated the need for culturally-empowering services that are currently unavailable. Traditional language centres, seniors housing, affordable transportation, and mental health care for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people were also recorded as necessary services that are often unavailable when needed.

All of these services are important for women to access their culture and poverty reduction programming, and should therefore be made accessible. Similar services that are in place now are often not Indigenous run, and prove to have too many barriers including re-traumatization and the continuation of colonial control of their Indigenous patrons. For example, one survey participant details her inability to access a senior's care facility for her mother who compared the facility in the community to a residential school she had attended in her youth. She went without proper care and her family continues to suffer great financial and emotional burden so that she is not readmitted into a facility that does not operate in a culturally appropriate manner.

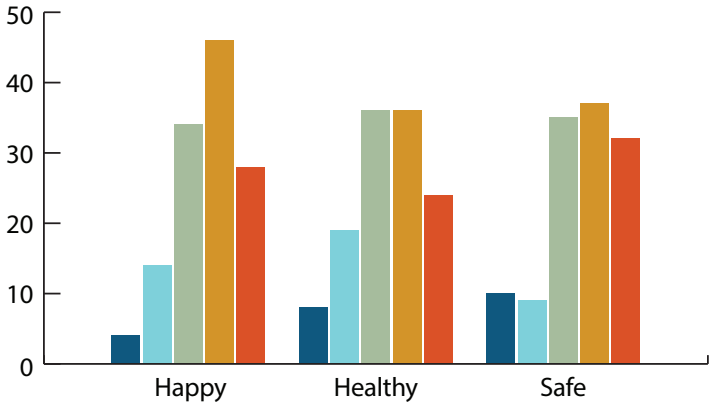
Figure 18 - Frequency of Facing Challenges Meeting Basic Needs



Additionally, participants reflected on their access to basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, water, healthcare, education, and sanitation). Figure 18 shows the distribution of responses to the question; do you ever face challenges meeting your basic needs? The majority of participants face challenges with meeting their basic needs, and all participants have struggled with this at some point. Approximately 23% of participants reported frequently (almost always and often) face difficulties in meeting their basic needs. Some participants stated they spend so much time and money on trying to meet their basic needs, that they have no time left to take care of other needs, such as their mental health, or finding employment that is meaningful to them. No Indigenous woman should be faced with the choice between receiving racist and sexist services or not receiving the services at all.

Finally, participants were asked to rate their general feelings of happiness, health, and safety on a scale from 1-5, along with any final comments. Figure 19 shows the distribution of results, with most women answering neutral (3) and more positive (4) feelings. On the other hand, there remain far too many participants who do not feel happy, healthy, or safe.

Figure 19 - General Feelings of Wellness on a Scale of 1-5



"I live in the north and family doctors are not available to us – they are mostly non-Indigenous workers they have in these positions, and they are not qualified, certified or professional."

– Survey participant

Recommendations from participants:

- Increase food security and sustainability projects in communities, including gardening, access to affordable healthy foods and traditional food gathering
- Invest in rewarding employment opportunities for Indigenous women that provide a living wage and foster pride
- Explore the additional intersectionality of Indigenous women with disabilities, LGBTQ and two-spirit folks, and those who are disenfranchised such as youth
- Need for self-determination of First Nations governments, and control over programming for Indigenous women. Programs need to be holistic and women-centered
- Take a 'housing first' model to provide stable and safe housing for Indigenous women and their families
- Provide northern communities with the same access to and quality of programs and services, especially in areas of water, healthcare, the mental wellness of children
- Empower Indigenous women in their fields of passion and support Indigenous women business owners, especially women in northern and isolated communities
- Invest in better training of Indigenous service providers to create more reliable service and reduce barriers
- Policies must be proactive in providing culturally appropriate services and programs to prevent violence perpetrated against Indigenous women and their families

"There is a real need to address root problems. We need people that can build relationships, that know about loss and trauma, and have access to both traditional and western approaches"

– Survey participant

INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS ROUND TABLE RESULTS

On October 1st, 2017 NWAC's Board of Directors met in Ottawa as leaders in their communities to engage on the Poverty Reduction Strategy. The Board of Directors is composed of the Presidents of each Provincial/Territorial Member Association (PTMA) with representation from all provinces and territories, with the exception of Nunavut. The group includes Indigenous youth, Elders, and organization Presidents. These 23 Indigenous women are leaders of grassroots organizations that work closely with Indigenous women to provide programming and/or advocacy work. These women participated in a one-day roundtable discussion wherein they shared their thoughts and experiences by responding to a series of open-ended questions on poverty and poverty reduction recommendations.

"The Indian Act is inherent racism and allows the existence of poverty and violence against our women."

– Gayle Frank, BC Native Women's Association

The roundtable session focused on unique factors that impact Indigenous women and girls who experience poverty, and recommendations for a culturally-relevant and gender based poverty reduction strategy. The women participating in the roundtable discussions provided perspectives from their personal experiences, those of their organizations, and of the Indigenous women they represent. Several themes arose from the roundtable sessions, and the following section captures these ideas and recommendations.

Accurate data

Roundtable participants noted the importance of collecting accurate data that is representative of each Indigenous identity. Participants agreed there is a lack of accurate data, and data that does not capture the realities of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women as distinct groups with their individual realities. The experiences of Indigenous women are often amassed with non-Indigenous women or with Indigenous men. Currently, there is no clear data that captures the prevalence of poverty and the quantitative and qualitative impacts that impact First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women. The government will only be able to properly understand and address poverty reduction for Indigenous women when accurate data is prioritized.

Recommendations:

1. Collect and analyze disaggregated data that reflects the unique experiences of First Nation, Inuit and Métis women from each other, Indigenous men, and non-Indigenous women.
2. Reclaim traditional Aboriginal protocols, processes and understandings around ways of knowing and what it means to conduct research.

"The government has their statistics, but they may not accurately reflect real Indigenous people"

– Alma Brooks, National Elder Representative

Cultural supports

Colonization and the imposition of colonial regulations on Indigenous ways of life have created troublesome restrictions on traditional Indigenous ways of sustaining life. Participants shared how following their cultural teachings would improve access to quality housing, food, and wellness, but the legacy of oppressive government regulations has created taxing barriers for Indigenous women in meeting their basic needs. Liza Peiper of the Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories detailed her community's frustrations with accessing affordable, nutritious food in the North. Community members who obtain the majority of their food through traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering increasingly encounter barriers. She explained the restrictions on hunting caribou, the contamination of the waters and fish, and the impacts of climate change on vegetation. Peiper noted that "we know how to work with the animals" and, added that her community relies heavily on hunting and fishing. Food in grocery stores is expensive and tends to lack nutritional value in northern communities, and prices continue to increase, so when traditional food sources are denied, the people are removed from their traditions and their finances are overstretched.

"The availability of cultural resources is less and less, for all ages, but especially our First Nations youth and women with mental health issues who are in bigger crisis because they can't help themselves."

– Mary Hannaburg, Quebec Native Women Inc.

Other participants built on Peiper's example by connecting restrictions on hunting and fishing to cultural disassociation. Through land and water contamination and straining restrictions, Indigenous people's relationship with the land is changing and traditional roles are not being realized. NWAC's national youth representative, Jaylene Delorme, who hails from the Northwest Territories describes her desire to learn traditional ways of hunting to provide for her family, but because of strict hunting regulations and the impacts of climate change, she is unable to do so and therefore feels obstructed to fully accessing her culture.

This concept does not only apply to areas of food and nutrition, but as Mary Hannaburg of the Quebec Native Women Inc. states, it is also about traditional ways of healing and fostering mental and spiritual wellness in women. Participants discussed the importance having culturally appropriate, women-centered programs that ensure safe and quality programming.

Recommendations:

1. Remove legal barriers to hunting and fishing to supplement household access to food, and address the harmful impacts of climate change on the food supply for northern and isolated Indigenous communities.
2. Increase cultural workshops and capacity of healing processes in communities to cultivate mental and spiritual wellness as a condition to alleviating negative impacts of poverty.

Women in the workforce

Roundtable participants highlighted the difficulty of securing safe and rewarding employment for Indigenous women, particularly those with lower levels of education and lower skilled jobs. Indigenous women are often excluded or passed up for trade and skilled worker employment opportunities that do not require higher educations. Men are typically employed in labour intensive industries such as mining and forestry, which are prominent in isolated communities. Participants described the experiences, particularly of young women, who were unable to obtain a higher education because of associated financial and social costs (lack of child care, employment, family support, etc.). Likewise, they were unable to secure work in their communities, so they moved to cities with more employment opportunities. Indigenous women should not have to relocate from their home communities in order to work in any capacity.

Recommendation:

1. Provide meaningful economic opportunities for Indigenous women in their communities, and foster Indigenous employment programs such as Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS), which prioritizes the needs and skills of all Indigenous women.

"Men have opportunities to go on mine runs, but women have to stay at home. They aren't offered the same opportunities, but there's no guarantee the man will send money back to their partner or children."

– Tania Larivière, Southern Youth Representative

Intersectionality and marginalization

Young women are unable to access certain support services either because they are too young or do not meet financial assistance requirements such as having children, and feel forced into dangerous situations. Judy Hughes from the Saskatchewan Aboriginal Women's Circle recounts a young woman who was fleeing an abusive home and found herself alone with no financial or social supports. She sought housing and financial support, and was told that if she did not have children they could not help her, despite barely being out of childhood herself. This young woman was encouraged by non-Indigenous service providers to become a young mother in order to secure funds to meet her basic needs. Statistics Canada reports that young Indigenous women are three times more likely to become young mothers than their non-Indigenous counterparts[1]. First Nations and Inuit women have the highest youth fertility rates in Canada. Furthermore, young mothers are more likely to experience severe impacts of poverty such as mental health deterioration, and living in overcrowded housing.

Additionally, the overincarceration of Indigenous women is both a symptom and cause of poverty among Indigenous people. Indigenous women comprise approximately 5% of the female population in Canada, yet 39% of the female prison population[2]. Indigenous women exiting the prison system are marginalized politically, socially, and economically. Culturally specific reintegration and bridging programs within prisons and after release are imperative to improving rates of Indigenous women reoffending and ensuring Indigenous women who have been incarcerated are provided opportunities to engage meaningfully in the labour market. Stigmatization around incarcerated women creates a substantial barrier in societal reintegration. Cultural programming that addresses the urgent needs of incarcerated women and their needs upon exiting the prison system provide cultural mentorship, guidance, and resources for success.

Recommendations:

1. The Poverty Reduction Strategy must take a holistic approach that looks at the layers of marginalization and intersectionality that Indigenous women experience, and the past, present, and future realities of individuals and their communities.

2. Invest in Indigenous specific services that are culturally relevant in social service areas such as: reintegration and bridging programs for incarcerated Indigenous women, addiction and detox centres, housing and shelter supports, child care, and employment centres.

"If you come out of prison and you can't explain your lack of employment then that's a huge issue when trying to get support."

– Maxine Elter, Alberta Aboriginal Women's Society

[1] Garner, R., Guimond, E., and Senécal, S. 2013. The Socio-Economic Characteristics of First Nation Teen Mothers. International Indigenous Policy Journal, 4(1).

[2] NWAC (2017) Indigenous Women in Solitary Confinement: Policy Backgrounder

Violence

Violence is present through the cycle of poverty as a cause, result, and barrier to escaping poverty. Several women at the roundtable recounted being in a situation where either they themselves or their loved ones stayed in an abusive relationship because of economic dependency created by poverty. These women stayed in relationships with violent and/or abusive men in order to provide for their children because they were unable to find work, housing, or child care. As a result, family abuse increases and the mental health of the whole family deteriorates. Similarly, other round table participants noted times when women would leave abusive relationships and subsequently had to move far away from their family supports. They had to move to city centres to escape violence and pursue employment opportunities, but became caught up in sex trafficking which was nearly impossible to escape with no family support. Other participants echoed that these situations continue to be prominent realities for the women in their communities, but that city supports have their own barriers. Typically, these mainstream services are underfunded, chronically overcapacity, and do not provide culturally appropriate services for Indigenous women. Additionally, round table participants noted the connections between these types of 'survival relationships' and missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). As an understanding of the root causes, trends and impacts of violence against Aboriginal women and girls evolves and strengthens, new connections between violence and other policy areas must be identified and addressed.

Recommendations:

1. Provide safe shelter for Indigenous women fleeing violence.
2. Ensure Indigenous women have safe and cultural supports to escape violent relationships, for example, provide affordable and safe child care that is culturally appropriate for Indigenous women.

'Housing First' model

Indigenous women are grossly over-represented in the homeless population with 35% of the Indigenous homeless population being women, compared to the 27% non-Indigenous population[3]. Despite these higher proportions of Indigenous women in the homeless population, services and programs are more oriented towards the male population. The availability of emergency beds and other services for Indigenous women are limited even in the largest cities. For example, participants describe experiences working at homelessness and domestic abuse shelters for Indigenous women and how most days upwards of 75% of those seeking shelter were turned away because of capacity or they did not meet the strict requirements of the shelter.

Social programming often requires participants to meet extensive requirements/criteria which prevents a lot of Indigenous women from accessing services. For example, Maxine Elter from Alberta explains the difficulty for Indigenous women who do not have government ID or place of residence to receive subsidized housing, use women shelters, secure employment, and access food banks. Services targeting homeless Indigenous women are sometimes so constrained as to be virtually non-existent. Secure housing is essential in ensuring the safety of Indigenous women and should be prioritized as the 'housing first' model states. The model operates on five core principles that should be applied with a cultural and gendered lens for Indigenous women: (1) immediate access to permanent housing with no housing readiness requirements, (2) consumer choice and self-determination, (3) recovery orientation, (4) individualized and client-driven supports, and (5) social and community integration[4].

Recommendation:

3. Implement the 'Housing First' model with an Indigenous and gendered lens to provide safe housing and increased opportunities for self-determination for Indigenous women experiencing homelessness or violence.

[3] NWAC (2007) Aboriginal Women and Homelessness: An Issue Paper

[4] Stephen Gaetz, Fiona Scott & Tanya Gulliver (Eds.) (2013): Housing First in Canada: Supporting Communities to End Homelessness. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press

GRASSROOTS ENGAGEMENT SESSION RESULTS

Methodology and Demographics

NWAC engaged with approximately 40 Indigenous women who participate in the Communities at Risk (CAR) program. CAR is a cultural community integration program that provides wrap-around, essential life skills to Indigenous women with multiple barriers through a five-month course. The program is delivered through partnerships with two centres: The Native Women's Resource Centre of Toronto (NWRCT) and Manitoba Moon Voices Inc. (MMVI). NWRCT met on October 31st for a half day facilitated session, and MMVI met on November 1st for a full day facilitated discussion. Because of the sensitive nature of these conversations, the identities of the participants and Elders present will be protected. All women present had or continue to have experiences with the impacts of poverty. The groups were comprised of approximately 20 urban, rural, and isolated First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women from coast to coast. The groups discussed 8-12 open ended questions concerning their realities, recommendations, and best practices with poverty reduction services and programs.

Arbitrary barriers to services

Arbitrary barriers to services – where those living just above the standardized poverty line make just enough to have their benefits removed, but not enough to access necessary services, like daycare. Moreover, mental health services are denied to Indigenous women because of the racist structures that are embedded in the mental healthcare system. These women often end up homeless, in shelters, or in prisons where they can pose a threat to their own safety and those around them.

Recommendations:

1. Greater access to information so that people can be aware of welfare programs, entitlements, and benefits and have them explained in terms and language they understand.
2. Instate a realistic, relative measure for poverty that does not remove benefits based on an arbitrary standard of income.
3. Support initiatives that make services, such as child care, free or affordable for those in poverty.

"Once you're over [that poverty line], it's cut back and you don't make enough. It's almost better to stay below to get those benefits. It's like you're penalized."

– Winnipeg participant

A collective, holistic approach to services

A poverty reduction strategy should seek to alleviate poverty by addressing the true causes and effects of poverty including unaffordable housing, food insecurity, social exclusion, income inequality, unemployment and discrimination against Indigenous women and other marginalized groups. Where possible, services should be administered in a non-judgmental, client-centered way by members of the community. Women supporting women is both a means for empowerment and community involvement. A holistic approach should also include resources and funding for Indigenous people to access sacred land, water, and ceremonies.

Some services such as food banks and hospitals are run by the Catholic Church which may prevent some Indigenous people from accessing them. Many Indigenous people have had negative experiences with racist comments from medical staff, especially as it relates to issues of substance abuse, addiction, and sex work.

Recommendations:

1. Create a connection between cultural knowledge and the administration of social services. This should also be supported by the inclusion of more Indigenous workers in social services.
2. Non-judgmental, culturally sensitive delivery of services, including medical services. Doctors who completed their residency in Northern/rural communities have better knowledge and understanding of how to help Indigenous people with culturally appropriate medical care.
3. Implement more proactive mental health supports, including the possibility of funding for medication. Individuals should not need to be in a crisis situation to access mental health services.

"It's so stigmatizing. It took four years for my son to be diagnosed with autism, his behaviour was blamed on the parent."

– Winnipeg participant

Access to Services

Resources should be available and accessible, particularly for disadvantaged communities. Current resources are underfunded and inadequate to meet the demand and as a result both the quality and delivery of services are negatively affected and many are unable to access them at all. Services such as health care and transportation, while publicly funded or subsidized, remain inaccessible or unaffordable to those living in poverty. Many services are also outside of transit routes or outside of the community, making a personal vehicle or a taxi necessary to accessing them.

Winnipeg participants spoke passionately about systemic racism in the city and surrounding communities that prevent a large number of women from accessing services. One woman explained how her friends are unable to access safe housing away from their violent abusers, so they live on the streets, and will enter the prison system each winter to ensure they have food and shelter.

Recommendations:

1. Providing free or subsidized bus passes, supporting a program where women drive other women, such as the SAFR rideshare service in Boston.
2. Placing service centres in the communities that they serve or where they are easily accessible by public transportation.

"The reality of buying a bus pass for my family would be ridiculous. I could have two vehicles for that price!"

– Winnipeg participant

"Child care, you have to sign up online, I get upset when they assume that everyone has access to technology."

– Toronto participant

CONCLUSIONS

The Poverty Reduction Strategy must understand and respond to the diverse experiences of poverty faced by Indigenous women as a marginalized population impacted by ongoing colonial processes. Community members must have the opportunity to articulate their own conceptualization of poverty and from there formulate a desirable path to achieving their unique aspirations, safety, and wellbeing.

Indigenous women must have unobstructed access to cultural supports and social, financial, and political services must be delivered in a culturally appropriate way. National policies, including the Poverty Reduction Strategy, need to address the role that cultural policy and practices play in addressing the needs of people who are socially excluded.

Survey participants identified a lack of access to land, water, cultural supports, and social services such as mental health services and housing – yet these are all necessary parts of building resiliency and reducing poverty for Indigenous women. Indigenous women leaders in the round table discussion highlighted the importance of providing quality services that are Indigenous centered. Cultural support through social services is critical for implementing meaningful positive impacts and drawing on the strengths of Indigenous women accessing these services. Grassroots Indigenous women echoed these recommendations, and added that there is a need to take a holistic approach that values the unique experiences and expertise each First Nations, Inuit, and Métis woman possesses.

Finally, through not only policy development, but direct action, NWAC and government agencies must collaborate to draw on the strengths and knowledge of Indigenous women to build effective and culturally centered poverty reduction services and programs.

Native Women's Association of Canada

L'Association des femmes autochtones du Canada