

# Towards Understanding and Supporting Marginalized Children and Youth in Ontario: The Case of Growing Up Indigenous



## Supports for Success

A project of [Wellesley Institute](#)

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- The East Scarborough Storefront
- Woodview Mental Health and Autism Services
- Native Child and Family Resource Centre
- The Lakehead Social Planning Council
- Morningside EarlyON Child and Family Centre

**Acknowledgement of Traditional Land**

We would like to acknowledge this sacred land on which the Wellesley Institute is situated. It has been a site of human activity for millennia. This land is the territory of the ancient Iroquoians, the Huron-Wendat Confederacy, the Seneca Village near High Park, and most recently, the guardians of the land are the Mississaugas of Credit First Nation. The territory was the subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Anishinaabeg Nation and allied Nations to peaceably share the land and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.

Today, the meeting place of Ontario is still the home to many Indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work in the community, on this territory.

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# Forward

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The Supports for Success project was built from a vision spearheaded by Camille Orridge, a Senior Fellow at Wellesley Institute. Camille saw that Black, Indigenous and marginalized youth were not reaching their full potential as they struggled with their families to navigate the education system through to post-secondary education or into the work world. Wellesley Institute ensured that there was representation from Black, Indigenous and marginalized groups and people from the beginning of the project through to the final analysis. The team worked with local research teams in Thunder Bay, Kingston, Scarborough and Brantford to conduct dialogue and talking circles in culturally respectful and safe manner based on the community.

The Supports for Success project provides important information for Indigenous youth and their families as they transition through the school system and either to post-secondary education or into the workforce. Through ongoing discussions, this report provides a strengths-based approach to Indigenous voices in transitions that have traditionally been difficult for Indigenous youth and families. A strengths-based model that uses a life course approach is in keeping with Indigenous ways of knowing and being in that it is wholistic and interconnected as well as working from individual, family, community and provincial viewpoints to look at the diverse Indigenous groups in each of the four cities and providing their voice to future directions. We want to thank all of the participants in Thunder Bay, Kingston, Brantford and Scarborough for openly providing your experiences – chi-miigwetch (big thank you) for sharing and being a part of our project.

Chi-miigwetch to Elder, mentor, scholar and friend, Diane Longboat for her guidance, knowledge, direction, and understanding in this project. Diane's thoughtful and purposed input kept the project moving forward in a good way – with good intentions and being respectful of the different Indigenous cultures across the province. Thank you to Dr. Emma Ware, Director of Fellowships & Integration and the team of researchers at Wellesley Institute: Stephanie Elliott, Malaika Hill, Dr. James Iveniuk, Rumaisa Khan, and a number of Masters students who worked closely with the community on the collection and analysis of the data and worked with tenacity and dedication to ensure the voices of the community were heard.

Finally, I would like to thank you, the reader, for reading this report. I hope that you will be part of the future directions and systemic change that is needed to help Indigenous youth now and into the future. Mamwi (together) we can work toward a more equitable world that respects different knowledges and ways of being. All my relations.

Dr. Angela Mashford-Pringle

# Introduction

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**Supports for Success (SFS) is a model intervention which helps public systems improve economic and social outcomes for marginalized children and youth in Ontario.**

Our children and youth are our future leaders and influencers with ambitious dreams and aspirations. Yet the playing field to achieving such success is undeniably uneven. Some youth have all the resources and supports they need to do well in school and fulfill their dreams. For others this is not the case. For young people who are Indigenous, newcomers, racialized, living in poverty, living with disabilities or living in rural settings, the path to success can be extra demanding, unpredictable and challenging. These youth must contend with multiple systemic barriers and this can lead to poorer social and developmental outcomes.

There is a need and readiness for innovative solutions that will create systems level change to improve Ontario's public support services for marginalized children and youth.

## **Our Focus on the Indigenous<sup>a</sup> Population**

This report focuses on the voices and experiences of diverse urban Indigenous youth, parents, service providers and community leaders across Ontario, to discover ways in which future systems change initiatives can better build on the strengths and support success in Indigenous communities.

While we focus on Indigenous populations in this report, there are many other marginalized communities that deserve to be better understood and served by our system. Different marginalized communities and geographical regions have unique histories and diverse experiences of systemic discrimination and oppressions. There are different community strengths, needs and priority issues to consider. By considering the experiences of Indigenous youth in Ontario, our hope is to draw lessons about how to improve our system for diverse and marginalized youth overall. Furthermore, we hope to encourage and inform similar information-gathering exercises aimed at understanding the strengths, needs and visions for change of parents, children and youth in different marginalized groups.

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a In this report we use the word "Indigenous" as a collective and inclusive term to describe all individuals who identify as First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

## The Case for Systems Change

Our young people rely on our public systems for support. Ontario has made considerable investments in support programs and services in addition to educational programs, and yet the outcomes are variable.

In some communities, outcomes are worsening rather than getting better, and there are significant equity gaps for marginalized populations. For example:

- The Canadian Census revealed that, the proportion of admissions to correctional services that are Indigenous has been on the rise since 2006. This figure was 46 per cent in 2016/17, making up nearly half of the youth correctional facility population<sup>1</sup>.
- Black youth<sup>b</sup> in the Toronto District School Board have 15 per cent higher dropout rates and, 17 per cent lower rate of application to post-secondary education than non-racialized White students<sup>2</sup>.
- The gap in high school graduation rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in Ontario is significant. For example, the four-year graduation achievement rate gap for First Nations students is 32.5 per cent, and the five-year graduation rate gap is 26.3 per cent<sup>3</sup>.
- The Canadian Mental Health Association has reported that youth in northern and rural Ontario have worse mental health outcomes than the rest of the province, and that the incidence is on the rise. For example, the rate of neo-natal abstinence syndrome (a withdrawal syndrome in the babies of mothers who use opioids) has increased six-fold in 12 years from 2002 – 2014<sup>4</sup>, and is condensed around the rural and northern regions.

Although we lack sufficient data to fully understand the outcome gaps for different marginalized groups in Ontario, the statistics that are available paint a clear picture that our supports systems are not adequately supporting success for all children and youth in Ontario.

To change this reality, we need to revitalize and transform our system to serve people with diverse needs and vulnerable populations; and to ensure that all children and youth, especially those who are most at risk, get the best chance for success.

## What our Research Tells us about Systems Change

Currently, multiple sectors support children and youth, from education to health; to sports and recreation, to spiritual and cultural programs. However, these different sectors often work in siloes, and do not share information, goals, tools or priorities when it comes to helping children and youth. Our most vulnerable youth, with multiple barriers and difficult

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b The terms “Black” and “White” are used in this example as this is the terminology used in the Toronto District School Board survey (the only school board in Ontario to collect data that allows for meaningful examination of outcomes by race). However, the Wellesley Institute recognizes that this terminology is problematic. These are racial categories and need to be interpreted with caution as they aggregate people from many different origins.

problems to overcome need our systems to work better together. In a disconnected system, marginalized children and youth are more likely to fall through the gaps, and do not always get access to all the services they need to succeed<sup>5</sup>. Developing an integrated and connected system of support can help, especially if these systems also align their efforts towards achieving common goals.

Collective impact is a leading strategy to facilitate structured collaboration across different sectors and to achieve system-level change. When different actors come together around a shared vision, align their goals, coordinate their actions, and evaluate their progress, transformation is possible.

In a series of five reports ([four Community Reports and one Summary Report](#)), Supports for Success (SFS) presents an expanded collective impact strategy that draws from three core approaches<sup>c</sup>:

- **It is based on a life-course approach that aims to create a continuum of support from conception to career;**
  - The life-course approach is a strategy that focuses on a healthy start to life and ensures that supports are created to provide gap-free services for young people at critical periods throughout their development<sup>6</sup>. Examples of this include ‘Cradle to Career’ support models and programs that span from infancy through to young adulthood, such as [Harlem Children’s Zone](#) in Harlem, NY.
- **It uses a strengths-based model to focus on building on the strengths of community and of young people;**
  - Moving upstream to focus on prevention shifts the focus of our collective impact towards a strengths-based approach, to support youth towards sustaining successful outcomes, rather than taking remedial measures to address negative outcomes after they manifest. By using the knowledge and experience of those who have succeeded, a strengths-based approach fosters positive youth development and self-efficacy in communities<sup>7</sup>.
- **It is developed from understanding the needs of diverse and marginalized youth.**
  - Another important strategy is to build a diverse group of supports and services to ensure different points of access and to reflect the complexities of communities. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has shown that programs and services that are culturally-adapted and reflect diversity produce better outcomes for clients and increase overall program satisfaction<sup>8</sup>.

The findings in the four SFS Community Reports include information that can help communities take a broad, systems-level view of their community to help identify the major strengths and barriers of their local support systems. The following sites were chosen in

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c For more information on how this model was developed and the evidence base supporting it, please refer to the [Supports for Success Summary Report](#).

conjunction with the province to align with ongoing provincial initiatives and reflect the various needs of different parts of the province:

1. Thunder Bay City,
2. Kingston-Galloway-Orton, East Scarborough (KGO),
3. Brantford and Brant County (Brant), and
4. Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox, and Addington (KFL&A)

In the present report, we dig deeper into the third approach of the SFS collective impact model – to root systems change in an understanding the strengths, barriers and needs of diverse and marginalized youth. We present a subset of evidence collected from Indigenous youth, parents, service providers and community leaders. Overall, evidence was collected in a four-part research process:

1. In our community profiles, demographics and social and developmental statistics were collected to help identify needs as well as community strengths. When possible, these statistics were compared across different population groups to determine whether marginalized groups had different outcomes than the rest of the population.
2. A program inventory was produced to offer an assessment of the supports available from cradle to career.
3. A social network analysis was done to see how well programs and organizations were connected.
4. Finally, we used focus groups to engage youth, families and service providers to ensure that recommendations were based on an understanding of the priorities of the community, its strengths, challenges and strategies for success.

In this report, we specifically focus on any evidence gained from these four activities that pertains to Indigenous people, organizations or populations. Our hope is that the evidence can support communities in current and future collective impact initiatives that aim to drive systems change and improve outcomes for the children and youth from diverse and marginalized populations.



# Methods for Working with Indigenous Populations

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## Our Principles

Wellesley Institute and Waakebiness-Bryce Institute for Indigenous Health formed a partnership to develop an approach for listening to and learning from Indigenous organizations, youth and parents. We also worked with an Elder, Diane Longboat, who is an educator (MEd), traditional healer and traditional teacher. These partnerships helped us ensure that this project created safe spaces for Indigenous people to participate and the meetings conducted in a way that made space for community self-determination, considering the historical trauma Indigenous communities have faced and continue to face in the name of ‘research.’

The principles of [Ownership, Control, Access and Possession \(OCAP\)](#) were adopted to guide our research approach. OCAP is a set of principles for assuring self-determination of Indigenous peoples in research. OCAP guides researchers so that research about Indigenous people is both *by* Indigenous people and *for* Indigenous people.

Working towards the OCAP principles:

- We hosted specialized *focus groups* or ‘Talking Circles’ in each project location that were culturally adapted for Indigenous participants based on local cultures and practices. The aim was to create a safe and welcoming space for Indigenous youth and parents to share their experiences about the social support system.
- In each site we *partnered with a local Elder* to discuss the protocols of the Talking Circles and how to design a safe and welcoming space for participants. Local land acknowledgements and opening prayers offered by the Elders were part of the sessions and varied by culture and region. As a result, the format of activities and focus group methods used in these sessions varied from community to community depending on local traditions. However, the goal remained the same – to hear from Indigenous youth and parents about their experiences with the social support system.
- Embedded in our research process, were opportunities for participants to inform the interpretation and presentation of our findings from the focus groups and Talking Circles. We carried out *community feedback sessions* where we presented early findings to participants and community members. We used community feedback to inform the ongoing analysis and interpretation of our findings. We also sent drafts of community reports to all study participants who indicated that they wished to be contacted, in order to get input on our findings and ensure that we were offering sound interpretations of their experiences.

To ensure that the voices of community have a primary role in driving collective impact work, we talked to people from each community. This included:

1. Key informant interviews with staff at programs serving Indigenous children and youth;
2. Consultation interviews with community leaders and change-makers who were able to provide a more general picture of constraints and opportunities facing Indigenous children, youth and families, including Indigenous urban communities in the region; and
3. Indigenous-only discussion groups where Indigenous parents, youth and community members could gather to discuss their experiences with getting connected to programs, what helped them as well as the priority needs and issues in their communities.

Findings from the Indigenous Talking Circles are found throughout this report. Table 1 gives information about the number of Talking Circle participants in each project location.

**Table 1. Participation in Indigenous-only Talking Circles**

Location	# Talking Circles	# Total Participants	Female	Male	Gender not specified
Brant	4	22	45%	27%	27%
KFL&A	2	12	67%	33%	0
KGO	3	11	73%	18%	9%
Thunder Bay	4	23	52%	48%	0

As described above, the analysis of the focus group and Talking Circle data was informed by feedback from study participants. We also used several models and themes relevant to the SFS model to help us identify relevant findings. One of the models we used was the [Thunderbird Partnership Foundations' First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework](#). Since our goal was to identify factors that lead to successful development and wellness from birth to adulthood, the Mental Wellness Continuum framework helped us to ensure we included factors that are particularly relevant to Indigenous communities. We were also guided in our analysis by Indigenous partners on the project and our project Elder.

# Community Profiles: The History and People of Four Ontario Communities

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A community has a distinct set of characteristics, strengths and challenges that form a social ecosystem within which some children and youth thrive, and some do not. Understanding the underlying histories, strengths, needs and context of the Indigenous population in each community is critical information to rely on when shaping systems change initiatives that are designed to improve supports for Indigenous children and youth. Below is a brief account of the geographical context, demographics, and social and developmental outcomes for Indigenous populations across the four SFS communities.

## History of Indigenous Peoples in Ontario

Throughout Canada and Ontario's history, Indigenous populations have been consistently stripped of their political autonomy, access to land and resources, and disconnected from their language, culture, and health care practices. In many cases, this has resulted in the displacement of identity, language, self-esteem and has eroded Indigenous self-reliance and collective responsibility<sup>9</sup>. The culture and roots of Indigenous civilizations across Canada pre-date colonization and history tells us that Indigenous Nations thrived in their homelands across Canada and the Americas. Today however, Indigenous peoples only live on 0.2% of their land<sup>10</sup>.

Indigenous communities in Thunder Bay, KGO, Brant and KFL&A have shared experiences and histories in terms of racism and colonization. However, each community also has its own unique geography, history, and people that shape the unique experiences, outcomes and priority issues for Indigenous children, youth and families within these regions.

- Thunder Bay is located on the northern shore of Lake Superior. The City of Thunder Bay has been built on the traditional territory of Fort William First Nation, signatory to the Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850. Thunder Bay services a large Northwestern Ontario Indigenous population who often have to fly into the city from small and remote First Nations in order to access programs and education. Thunder Bay is surrounded by small First Nations who visit the city regularly for education purposes, medical attention and employment.
- Brant on the other hand, is situated on the Grand River in Southwestern Ontario. It sits on the traditional land of the Mississaugas of the Credit and Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Indigenous peoples make up 8.3 per cent of the population in Brantford. Brant is also next to the largest First Nations community in Canada, the Six Nations of the Grand River that is home to nearly 17,000 First Nations people who may be accessing some services in Brant<sup>11</sup>.

- Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox & Addington (KFL&A) is situated on the traditional land of the Anishinaabeg Nation and Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The KFL&A region serves a diverse mix of both urban and rural Indigenous communities.
- Kingston Galloway/Orton Park (KGO) is a culturally diverse inner-city suburb that is located in east Scarborough, a region on the east end of Toronto. It is located on the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat Confederacy, the Anishinaabeg Nation (Mississaugas of the Scugog, Hiawatha, and Alderville), and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

## Demographics

The following section is a collection of demographic information on the Indigenous population in the four Supports for Success communities. The demographic information presented here is derived from the 2016 Census and presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Indigenous demographics in Ontario, Thunder Bay, Brant, KGO and KFL&A. Source: 2016 Census**

Indicator	Ontario	Thunder Bay	Brant	KGO	KFL&A
Total Population	13,448,495	107,910	134,200	31,865	193,350
Aboriginal Population (%) <sup>d</sup>	2.8	12.8	4.8	1.7	4.0
First Nation (%)	63.2	75.4	79.5	65.4	62.7
Métis (%)	32.2	22.6	17.1	26.2	32.0
Inuit (%)	1.0	0.2	0.3	1.9	0.6
Multiple Aboriginal Responses (%)	1.5	0.8	1.5	3.7	2.2
Aboriginal Responses not Included Elsewhere (%)	2.0	1.0	1.7	6.5	2.6
Aboriginal Population aged 0-24 (%)	40.9	47.2	46.8	N/A	39.3
Aboriginal Language Spoken Most Often at Home (%)	0.07	0.29	0.02	0.00	0.01
Most frequently Reported Aboriginal Languages Spoken Most Often at Home (%)	1) Ojibway, 36.0 2) Oji-Cree, 31.5 3) Cree, n.o.s., 24.1	1) Ojibway, 59.7 2) Oji-Cree, 33.9 3) Cree n.o.s., 3.2/ Swampy Cree, 3.2	1) Ojibway, 75.0	1) Swampy Cree, 100.0	1) Swampy Cree, 50.0/Algonquin, 50.0

n.o.s = not otherwise specified

## Social and Developmental Outcomes for Indigenous Children and Youth

One of the core ingredients of collective impact is the establishment of shared goals and outcomes to rally collaborative action. As part of our research, we chose a small set of

<sup>d</sup> The Indigenous population is likely to be higher than reported. Evidence indicates that the Canadian Census underestimates the number of Indigenous people by an estimated factor of 2-4.

social and developmental ‘success indicators’ at each of the five early life-stages to help us understand the well-being of children and youth in Ontario and inform the goal setting process (See our [Summary Report](#) for more information on the Supports for Success collective impact model and how this data supports it). Indicators were selected based on their predictive value of achieving positive outcomes in later life (See Appendix A of Summary Report for indicator rationales).

Where possible, data on the social and developmental indicators was collected for Indigenous children and youth across all sites and compared to non-Indigenous children and youth. Comparing how Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth are doing on these social and developmental indicators allows us to understand where Indigenous children and youth may be doing well, and where there is opportunity to improve outcomes by investing in targeted programs to support Indigenous youth.

In our Community Reports and Summary Report, we use data from several data sources including the Canadian Census, Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, Public Health Ontario and the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). However, data stratified by Indigenous identity was either unavailable or inaccessible from most sources, except for the Census and the CCHS.

The indicators presented here are related to employment, post-secondary education, health, mental health and sense of belonging. Evidence shows that if people have high educational attainment, they are more likely to be employed and enjoy financial security<sup>12</sup>. They can afford the resources, goods and services they need to live a healthy life. Good health and mental health in early years is associated with good health and mental health in adulthood<sup>13</sup>. Healthy children and youth are more likely to be productive and are better able to overcome life challenges and transitions<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup>. A strong sense of belonging is also important for health and well-being. People who feel like they belong are more likely to contribute to both their community and society<sup>13</sup>. These indicators also translate into social and economic benefits to society. For example, in 2006, someone with a post-secondary education in Ontario could expect to earn \$750,000 more than a high-school graduate over a 40-year period<sup>16</sup>. Higher earners in turn become higher paying tax-payers, consumers, use less social assistance and have better health<sup>17</sup>.

## **Indigenous Definitions of Success, Outcomes and Indicators**

To better understand how these selected social and developmental indicators of ‘success’ relate to Indigenous children and youth, it is important to consider how determinants and definitions of success and well-being vary across Indigenous cultures and communities. Indigenous people have unique worldviews, values and experiences which influence concepts of success and what

it means to live a good life<sup>18</sup>. For example, in our interviews within community, we heard how knowledge of one's own gifts and purpose in life is an important aspect of well-being. Developing these gifts under the guidance of Knowledge Keepers and Elders is viewed as just as important as formal education. We also heard how it is important to consider community-level determinants of success and well-being. Success is often thought of and measured at an individual level, however, measuring community-level outcomes such as strong relationships, community cohesion, good governance, and community relationships to language, culture and land can lead to a more fulsome understanding of Indigenous youth and their well-being<sup>19</sup>.

In Ontario, work has been done in partnership with Indigenous communities to identify Indigenous specific outcomes important for the well-being of Indigenous children and youth. These outcomes better reflect Indigenous understandings of success and well-being and include community level outcomes. For instance, the Aboriginal Advisory and Planning Committee of the Toronto Child and Family Network, identified five outcomes for the well-being of Indigenous children and families in Toronto, including self-knowledge, strong families, vibrant communities, cultural equity and self-determination<sup>20</sup>. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services have also developed five Indigenous specific outcomes as part of the Ontario Middle Years Strategy, Gearing Up report, which include outcomes related to wellness, cultural participation and pride, strong families and communities, self-determination and the responsiveness/accountability of service providers and government<sup>21</sup>. These were developed in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report and recommended actions.

However, indicators to measure these Indigenous specific outcomes have only recently been developed or are in the process of being developed. There is very limited data and information available on Indigenous-specific outcomes for children and youth in Ontario. One exception is the First Nations Regional Health Survey (RHS)<sup>22</sup>, the first and only national health survey to address First Nation and Inuit health. Administered and controlled fully by First Nations populations, this survey implements a strengths-based approach to understanding a variety of Indigenous health indicators across Canada including connection to culture, language, sense of belonging, source of social support, mental health, general health and balance<sup>23</sup>. The results of the RHS are elaborated on in further sections of this report (see Strengths of the Indigenous Community section).

## Data Challenges

Data challenges pose a significant barrier to understanding Ontario's Indigenous population and their well-being. The availability of population data for Indigenous communities in Ontario is fragmented and there are issues related to sampling which affect what data we are able to report on<sup>24</sup>.

The Census and the CCHS, which were used to obtain the data presented below, each have several limitations. The Census has challenges around the enumeration of Indigenous people. In Toronto, evidence indicates that the Census undercounts the number of Indigenous people by an estimated factor of two to four<sup>25</sup>. Incomplete enumeration or non-participation of First Nations communities, reluctance to self-identify and barriers to participation such as homelessness are among the key factors that influence the quantity and quality of Indigenous data in this survey<sup>24</sup>. There are also challenges around the availability of data. Publicly available Census data on Indigenous populations is sparse for small levels of geography (e.g. Thunder Bay, Brant, KGO, KFL&A).

The CCHS does not include Indigenous people who live on-reserve<sup>26</sup>. As well, the CCHS is a sample of the Canadian population. If only a small number of Indigenous people are included in the sample, it creates barriers to detailed analyses, especially at smaller levels of geography. In many cases, we were unable to report on Indigenous data at the desired level of geography due to poor quality and issues of suppression<sup>27</sup>. Community members also raised concern around the cultural relevancy of the CCHS. Indigenous people have unique ways of thinking, seeing, being and relating<sup>18</sup> which may influence how they interpret and respond to questions of health and well-being.

To address these challenges, there is a need to collaborate with Indigenous peoples to develop ways to collect data that are more inclusive, relevant and culturally meaningful<sup>28</sup>. An important first step is developing respectful and trusting relationships with Indigenous communities. For example, it is crucial to work in partnership with community to explore different types of research methods and knowledge that could be used to better understand Indigenous populations and their well-being<sup>20</sup>.

The quantitative data presented in the section below is based on the data available. Where possible, we identify limitations specific to each indicator. We also raise important cultural and contextual considerations which are important to think about when interpreting the data.

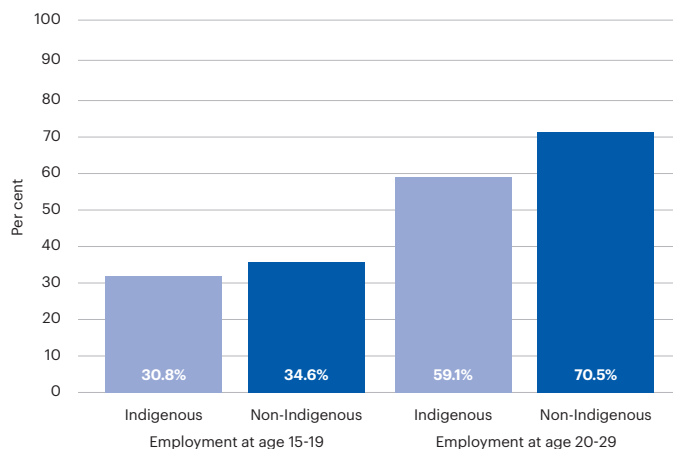
## Employment

In Ontario, rates of employment are lower for Indigenous adolescents and young adults compared to those who are non-Indigenous. According to the Census 2016, 30.8 per cent of Indigenous adolescents are employed compared to 34.6 per cent of non-Indigenous adolescents. In adulthood the gap widens even further, with 59.1 per cent of Indigenous young adults getting employment, as compared to 70.5 per cent of non-Indigenous young adults (Figure 1).

The trend in employment rates is comparable across Thunder Bay, Brant, KGO and KFL&A, with Indigenous youth having lower rates of employment. For example, in KFL&A, 30.8 per cent of Indigenous adolescents are employed, and 40.7 per cent of non-Indigenous

adolescents are employed. However, there is one exception, with Indigenous adolescents in KGO having higher employment rates (27.3 per cent) than those who are non-Indigenous (18.0 per cent).

**Figure 1. Indigenous adolescents and young adults are less likely to be employed.**  
Source: Census, 2016.



It is important to consider the cultural context of these statistics when interpreting the differences we see in employment rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. Indigenous youth may engage in work that is not captured by the Census definition of an employed person. When we spoke to community members, we heard that traditional hunting, trapping, medicine gathering, healing and ceremonial life are valued as important work that benefits the community. However, this type of work may not be captured in the Census definition if it is unpaid or outside of the context of an employer-employee relationship, business or professional practice. The quantity and type of employment opportunities available to young people within Indigenous communities and the broader community may also differ significantly and these local contexts should be considered when interpreting Census findings.

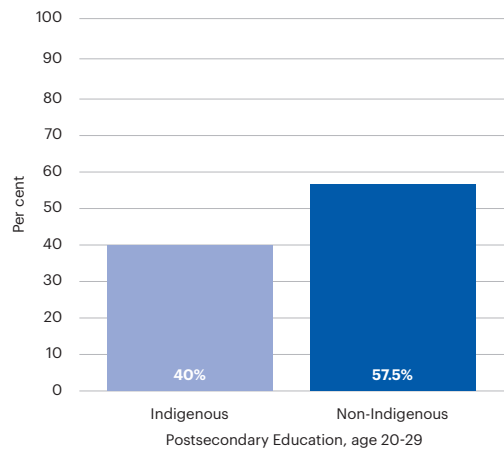
## Education

Indigenous youth in Ontario are less likely to have a post-secondary education compared to non-Indigenous youth. Approximately 40.0 per cent of Indigenous youth ages 20-29 have a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree, compared to 57.5 per cent of non-Indigenous youth (Figure 2).

A similar trend in post-secondary education rates exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth across the four SFS sites. Thunder Bay has the greatest difference in post-secondary education rates, with approximately 33.0 per cent of Indigenous youth having a post-secondary education compared to 59.7 per cent of non-Indigenous youth.



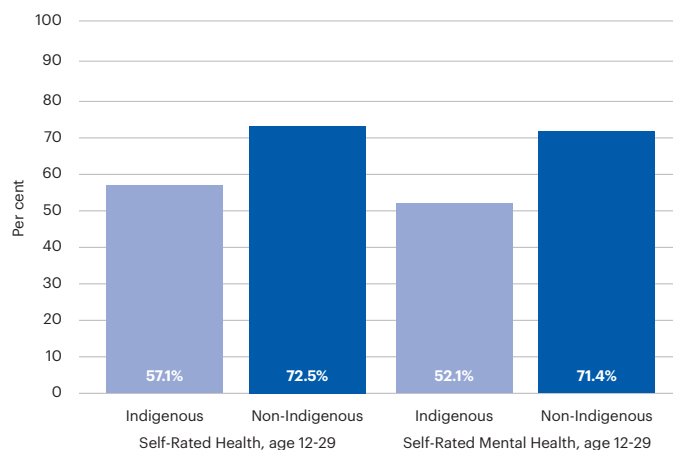
**Figure 2. Indigenous youth are less likely to have a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree. Source: Census 2016.**



## Health and Mental Health

According to the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), 57.1 per cent of Indigenous youth (ages 12-29) in Ontario reported excellent or very good health, and 52.1 per cent reported excellent or very good mental health. In comparison, 72.5 per cent of non-Indigenous youth report their health as excellent or very good, and 71.4 per cent report excellent or very good mental health. Overall, Indigenous youth are 15-19 per cent less likely to report positive health and mental health outcomes.

**Figure 3. Indigenous youth report poorer health and mental health. Source: Canadian Community Health Survey, 2015-16.**



The data on health and mental health outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in the province of Ontario is of adequate quality (i.e. has no quality warning<sup>e</sup>). However, health and mental health outcomes for smaller levels of geography (i.e. Thunder Bay, Brant, KGO, KFL&A) cannot be reported as the number of Indigenous youth who participated in the CCHS was too small to produce reliable estimates.

Note that reports of self-rated health and mental health may differ between adolescents and young adults. Here we have combined the two age groups to increase the sample size and reliability of estimates. As a result, change in health and mental health status between adolescence and young adulthood may be masked.

Indigenous children and youth may also have different conceptualizations of health and mental health which influence how they respond to such questions (e.g. a more holistic conceptualization of health that considers the interrelatedness of physical, spiritual, emotional and mental health<sup>27</sup>). In addition, cultural differences in the identification of illness, stigma associated with illness and differences in scale use can all affect how youth report on health and mental health.

## **Sense of Belonging**

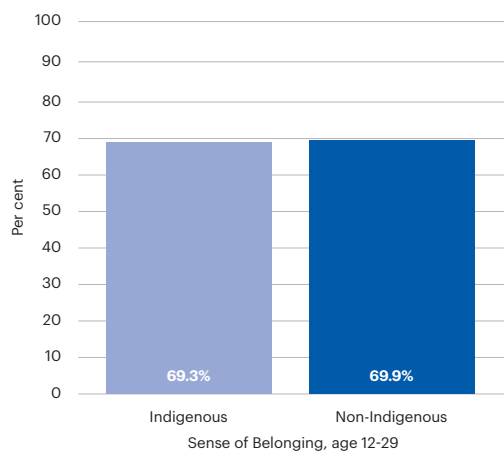
Approximately 69.3 per cent of Indigenous youth (ages 12-29) in Ontario rate their sense of belonging to their local community as very strong or somewhat strong, compared to 69.9 per cent of non-Indigenous youth.

Considering how different cultures vary in their interpretations of community is important when interpreting these findings. The CCHS's reference to one's local community implies sense of belonging to one's surrounding geographic community. However, there are many different types of local community for which sense of belonging is important (e.g. geographical, organizational, interest). For Indigenous children and youth, this includes one's sense of belonging to their Clan, Nation and territorial homeland. Sense of belonging may change based on the geography or community of reference.

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e A quality warning is provided when a CCHS estimate has a coefficient of variation between 15.0 per cent and 35.0 per cent. This means that it is not a very precise estimate and should be interpreted with caution.

**Figure 4. Indigenous and Non-Indigenous youth have a similar sense of belonging to their local community. Source: Canadian Community Health Survey, 2015-16.**



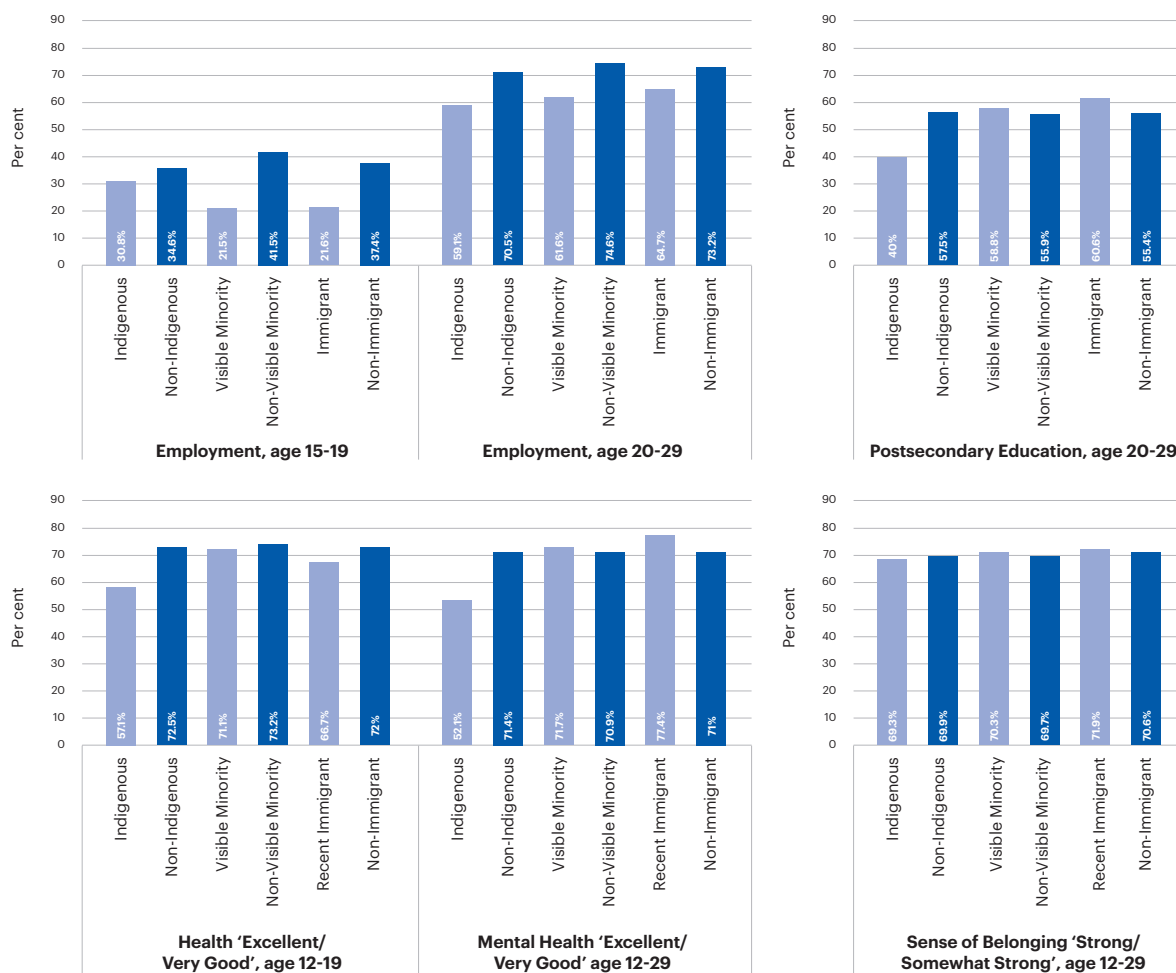
The limitations noted for health and mental health outcomes above also apply to sense of belonging. Data on sense of belonging at the provincial level is of adequate quality. However, due to sampling, data on sense of belonging at the community level is suppressed or too unreliable to report. Sense of belonging may also differ between adolescent and young adulthood, which is not captured in this combined age category.

### Comparison to other Marginalized Groups

Comparing Indigenous youth to other marginalized groups, such as visible minorities and recent immigrants, we can see where Indigenous youth lie on the gradient of marginalization in comparison to other vulnerable populations. Findings show that Indigenous youth are experiencing worse outcomes and greater inequities than other vulnerable populations. For example, in young adulthood (ages 20-29) Indigenous employment rates are 59.1 per cent, compared to 61.6 per cent for immigrant groups, and 64.7 per cent for visible minority groups. For post-secondary education, 40.0 per cent of Indigenous youth are completing a post-secondary education, compared to 58.8 per cent visible minority and 60.6 per cent for immigrant groups. Health disparities are also more prominent for Indigenous populations with 57.1 per cent of Indigenous youth reporting excellent or very good self-rated health, compared to 71.1 per cent of visible minorities and 66.7 per cent of people with recent immigrant status. Similarly, for mental health, 52.1 per cent of Indigenous youth reporting excellent or very good self-rated mental health, compared to 71.7 per cent of visible minorities and 77.4 per cent of people with recent immigrant status. For sense of belonging all three group are comparable, with 69.3 per cent of Indigenous youth having a strong or somewhat strong sense of belonging, compared to 70.3 for visible minority youth and 71.9 for recent immigrant youth.

Note that visible minority groups and immigrant groups may also experience worse outcomes when compared to non-visible minority and non-immigrant groups. Differences in outcomes between these groups are shown in Figure 5 below and discussed further in our [Summary Report](#).

**Figure 5. Indigenous youth compared to visible minority and immigrant youth.**  
**Source: Census 2016, Canadian Community Health Survey, 2015-16.**



## Understanding these Outcomes

By comparing social and developmental indicators for vulnerable youth, we can see how factors such as racialization and Indigenous identity affect important social and developmental outcomes. In the comparison between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth, Indigenous youth face greater disparities when it comes to employment, education, health and mental health outcomes. It is likely that Indigenous youth also experience disparities in other social and developmental outcomes for which data was limited or not available for analysis.

These disparities can be best understood through a systems lens, by recognizing the systemic barriers for Indigenous people. A history of colonization, social exclusion, systemic racism and a failure to recognize treaty rights have created and sustain an unjust system for Indigenous people<sup>24</sup>. These social and political factors are built into our Canadian institutions, policies, practice and culture. The result for Indigenous people is the obstruction of self-determination and cultural continuity; limited community resources and infrastructure; lack of access to quality programs and services, including education; and profiling by the criminal justice and child welfare systems<sup>24</sup>. The disparities in outcomes related to such as education, employment and health should be understood as the direct result of the injustices Indigenous people have experienced within our public systems in Canada<sup>27</sup>.

*“The continued marginalization and criminalization experienced by Indigenous peoples and people of colour occurs in direct relationship to the continued societal and systematic privileging of white people in Canadian society.”*

– First People Second Class Treatment p. 5

# Community Strengths and Assets: A Starting Point for System Revitalization

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Although there are gaps that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in mainstream measures of employment, education and health outcomes, there are significant strengths and assets in communities that are not often broadly captured in formal evaluations and surveys. These strengths are important seeds for systems change and can be built on to improve supports for Indigenous children and youth. Community assets include the strengths of Indigenous people and the Indigenous community, the strategies that are already working well for Indigenous youth, and the multiple community programs and services that are doing a good job of serving Indigenous youth and youth with diverse needs. Thinking about the community assets available for supporting Indigenous children and youth, it is also important to consider the current uptake of cultural safety, competency and sensitivity training, as well as the relationships between organizations, programs and services that determine how children and youth navigate and access the system.

*“Our weakest link is considered to be our strongest point, so it’s always like, we defend the weakest link the most and then the stronger points and they compliment it, so that as a whole we are stronger rather than as a whole we are weaker.....So, by empowering the strength in unity, we as a people are strong”.*

- Indigenous youth in KFL&A

## Strengths of the Indigenous Community

There is limited research in a First Nations context that aims to implement a strengths-based lens to understanding wellness<sup>22</sup>. A strengths-based approach aims to understand positive influences, protective factors and strategies that are working well<sup>23</sup>. Although the legacy of colonialism still continues today, First Nations people demonstrate a significant amount of resilience and strength. This is demonstrated through connection to land, respect for Elders and Knowledge Keepers and significant ties to culture, spirituality and language.

The First Nations Regional Health Survey (RHS)<sup>23</sup> implemented a strengths-based approach to understanding a variety of health indicators for Indigenous populations across Canada. Some of the main strengths from [Volume 2 of the Report](#) are highlighted below:

- First Nations youth reported having a strong connection to culture, with 1 in 5 (19.9%) always or almost always participating in their community's cultural events and more than half (51.3%) sometimes participating. Nearly one quarter of youth (24.7%) reported that cultural or traditional activities made them healthy.
- The majority of First Nations adults reported either a very strong (33.1%) or somewhat strong (47.5%) sense of belonging to their community.
- Nearly two thirds of grandparents (63.6%), more than half of parents (54.4%) and more than one third of school teachers (38.1%) were reported to have helped First Nations youth understand their culture. A very small proportion (3.6%) of First Nations youth had no one to help them understand their culture.
- More than one-third (37.8%) of First Nations adults perceived their general health as very good or excellent.
- Half (50.5%) of First Nations adults rated their mental health as very good or excellent.
- First Nations adults reported feeling in balance physically (68.9%), emotionally (68.1%), mentally (69.8%) and spiritually (68.1%) most or all of the time.

The findings of RHS, emphasize that First Nations children and adults in Canada hold a strong connection to language, culture and community. This was echoed in by community members in our four study locations.

Community members told us about how opportunities to connect with Indigenous language, culture and identity were significant in contributing to their well-being and personal development. Opportunities to learn language, customs and traditional teachings from Elders can foster resiliency, healing and cultural pride in Indigenous youth<sup>29</sup>. Connecting to culture can also be an empowering experience that supports pride and identity<sup>29</sup>. According to Chandler and Lalonde, cultural continuity (defined as the contemporary preservation of traditional culture) is essential for identity formation and can serve as a protective factor against suicide, especially among First Nations adolescents<sup>30</sup>. This is demonstrated by the finding that there is a stronger sense of belonging and lower youth suicide rate in First Nations communities that actively preserve and practice their culture<sup>23</sup>. Community relationships were also identified as a significant source of support for Indigenous youth in our discussion groups. Youth told us that relationships with family, self and the community were integral for mental and emotional well-being and helped support their own individual resilience. Together these relationships help young people to cope with challenges they may experience and develop into strong and resilient young adults<sup>20, 18</sup>.

## Community Perspectives on Programs and Services

Parents, youth, service providers and local leaders shared their perspectives on the programs and services supporting children and youth across development and during transitions. Below is a brief description of what we heard from community members about the strengths

of these systems, particularly regarding what is being offered in term of culturally appropriate programming. This is not a comprehensive list of all services that exist, but rather, serves as an overview of some of programs and services that were highlighted by participants in the conversations we had with community. For an analysis that includes all programs and services in each community (including mainstream services) see the [SFS Community Reports](#).

## Early Years

Culturally relevant services supporting families during prenatal, infancy and early childhood are important sources of support for new parents. In Brant, parents expressed that birthing centres were a valued source of support during and after pregnancy. Parents particularly appreciated transportation opportunities, breastfeeding consultants and breast pumps that were offered by birthing centres. The centre accessed at Six Nations of the Grand River provides culturally relevant prenatal classes, parenting resources, clinics and home visits. Here, women can take part in a traditional birthing process that incorporates language, culturally appropriate room and bed design and a choice of services that compliment traditional and spiritual customs. Doula training is also underway for some members of the community to further the service network to mothers and their families.

In Thunder Bay, mothers spoke highly of workers that help advocate for them during the delivery process. This is especially true in instances when health care providers do not allow women to follow their own birth plan, or when Children's Aid stands waiting at delivery to apprehend the baby. Home visits after delivery also provided a substantial amount of support for mothers who were working through, or at risk for, post-partum depression. Echoing the success of these programs, mothers told us that these programs tend to have long wait lists and fill up quickly. Although parents prefer to access Indigenous-specific services, they are often required to access other services due to long wait lists. Mothers who struggle with addictions also struggle with finding treatment centres nearby that accommodate their babies and families, and experience fear and stigma accessing service. The cost of transportation and availability of transportation services in the winter also serves as significant barrier to accessing care.

Childhood programs that encourage early learning and connection with culture are well-received and appreciated by parents, particularly in KGO and Thunder Bay. These tend to take the form of accelerated daycare programs that are Indigenous specific and free of charge. Parents speak highly of these early childhood interventions and their ability to decrease separation anxiety and enhance academic performance. Parents told us that these programs introduced their children to culture connection early on, through introducing them to dance, and opportunities to create shawls for pow wows. There is much literature on how programs such as these build a positive sense of identity and belonging to community very early on in life<sup>23</sup>. Children also have the opportunity to develop their sense of self early on and are introduced to who they are by Elders in the community. Parents spoke to us about feeling



more connected to the broader community through these programs and how they were able to reconnect with culture through their children. However, like many other programs, there are long wait lists that make it difficult for participants to enrol. Other programs that were mentioned as beneficial for early childhood development include cultural programming within some schools.

## Middle Childhood

In KFLA, community members told us about Indigenous support workers provided by school boards, as well as elementary schools supporting cultural learning and valuing Indigenous parents and teachings. In Thunder Bay, many adolescents explained that programs available to them during their middle years were helpful in building their transition into adolescence and adulthood. Of particular importance are Indigenous education programs for at-risk students within local schools, that aim to address poverty through increasing life skills and providing cultural, social and educational support. Mentoring supports during this life stage are particularly beneficial and exist through programs that support life skills, employment and education.

However, the middle years can often be a life stage that is under-resourced and under-funded. In KGO, parents explained that after early childhood, there is a generally a lack of programming for children in their middle years who no longer qualify for daycare programs. This is a sentiment echoed by service providers in Brant who explain that much of the focus of government funding has been on the early years (0 to 6) and the transitional years (16 to 21). Although services are lacking in this area generally, this is especially the case for Indigenous youth. We heard that the impact of unmet needs in this age-group manifests through behavioural and emotional problems in schools and a long wait list for mental health supports. While Friendship Centres are eligible to receive funding for this age group, there is a lack of a Friendship Centre in Brantford or Kingston to secure this funding.

## Adolescence and Young Adulthood

In Thunder Bay, adolescents from fly-in communities told us about the supports that are in place to assist them with their transitions. Many of them attend a First Nations high school where they have access to supports that make them feel welcome and can access several land-based activities such as hunting, pow wows and an open tepee and firepit. Youth talk about opportunities to learn skills such as beaver skinning, making bows and arrows, and hunting from Elders and community members. They are also provided opportunities to smudge and engage in prayers. In a talking circle conducted among young adults, participants told us about the mainstream programs (non-Indigenous) that helped them transition out of alcoholism and addiction. They mentioned programs that helped develop tangible skills and case management programs that assist with paperwork. Of importance were passport

programs that subsidize physical activity programming and equipment, that youth explained help them cope with traumatic events during their life.

In the KGO area, there are Indigenous-specific GED programs that are offered free of cost and are accommodating toward students with competing priorities and special needs. Students are encouraged to create their own goals and are offered a non-traditional method of schooling where they have successfully completed the program at their own pace. Youth in KGO are also able to access many services in downtown Toronto that help them with their transition into young adulthood. Some youth have accessed specialized Indigenous employment and training agencies that have helped them gain admission into post-secondary education. Other sources of support include Indigenous organizations downtown that provide access to computers, summer job opportunities, scholarships and awards. Youth are also able to access Indigenous cultural centres that sometimes provide free counselling services, and there are Indigenous organizations that offer traditional forms of health care.

However, these programs tend to have long wait lists, and when youth turn to free services offered by their university as an alternative, they are often faced with counsellors who hold ignorant or stereotypical view of Indigenous culture. In addition, youth explain that commuting and transportation makes these programs difficult to access. Service providers told us that programs in downtown Toronto also tend to be better funded. Although there are programs available in the KGO area, stigma from the community often prevents them from accessing these services locally. This is due to continued oppression and racism faced by community members attempting to access certain institutions. There are systemic barriers in the offering of many services related to spirituality, ceremony and language, as these services tend to be offered in inappropriate locations and are not trusted by community members.

Among adolescents and young adults in Brant, sources of support included Indigenous guidance counsellors in schools, traditional teachers and Elders, role models, and Indigenous workers in secure custody facilities. Opportunities to connect with culture, language, performance, music and sports were also mentioned by youth as opportunities to recognize their own strengths, remind them of their purpose and bring issues to light in their community. For example, youth explained that they feel appreciated when they are able to do a Thanksgiving Address in the morning at schools. Youth also explain that they appreciated the presence of a Longhouse in this area, which provides opportunities to consult with Elders and Knowledge Keepers and serves as a ceremonial place throughout the year.

Additionally, in KFLA, an Indigenous Student Centre at Queen's University exists as a safe space to allow students to connect with and learn about Indigenous customs.

## **Additional Insights**

Overall, the landscape of Indigenous services varies across site and life stage. From our conversations with community members, we learned that many organizations are siloed in

Thunder Bay and that there can be improvements made for access between services. In Brant, some of the main assets in this area include the presence of Elders, a strong land base and a range of culturally relevant programs offered in Six Nations Grand River Territory. Community members also mentioned Indigenous housing organizations in Brant as a source of support and referrals for resources across all stages of the life course. However, there are only two Indigenous agencies in Brant County and the community indicated there is a need to increase the number of services and capacity of existing organizations. Transportation continues to be a major impediment to accessing cultural and spiritual programming from Brantford to Six Nations and return. There is no bus service and the taxi is very expensive. Similar challenges exist in Thunder Bay where both parents and youth explained that transportation is a huge factor in determining access to services.

In KFL&A, much of the conversations around programs and services centered around the notion that there is a lack of a central welcoming space since the closing of the main Friendship Centre. Although there are fragmented efforts that address different life stages, there is no common space for families to gather. Some programs that were mentioned by community members include counselling centres that incorporate Indigenous worldviews and Elder support, as well Aboriginal patient navigators in hospitals that provide support for traditional healing. Community members also spoke highly of opportunities to deliver training on Aboriginal views of health to nursing students. We also heard about a round house for ceremonies and a sweat lodge located in Napanee just outside Kingston. Youth justice organizations in KFL&A also offer traditional healing circles and restorative approaches to justice, however, community members told us that they have bad experiences with this service and that they do not reflect Indigenous values. Overall, participants spoke to the need for a central space and family resource centre to make referrals to Indigenous-specific supports or services.

Near KGO, there are also Indigenous-specific and culturally appropriate emergency shelters available for women and children located downtown. Although there are group homes available in the KGO area, these are often regarded as unsafe.

*“Like I physically, emotionally could not get my s\*\*t together to know who I should call next, and I’d never been in a crisis situation within the Indigenous community to know who do I call, you know, and I wasn’t as connected to the Katarokwi community as I am now to know ...like I’m just learning about this stuff two and a half years later thinking like why –There’s like Indigenous liaisons with the board that do support, it didn’t happen. Like there’s just so many things that could have been offered and I didn’t know to ask, and I shouldn’t have had to ask, or I was asking and it wasn’t being offered.”*

- Parent in KFL&A

## Cultural Safety, Sensitivity, and Competency Training

Cultural sensitivity, competency and/or safety training is an important asset for any organization serving ethnoculturally diverse populations. These three concepts exist on a continuum from cultural sensitivity - an attitude that recognizes the importance of the differences between cultures, to cultural safety - an approach that considers the structural and interpersonal power imbalances in shaping program and service experiences (See Table 3).

Training in Indigenous cultural sensitivity, competency, and safety is essential in helping an organization and its staff to:

- Understand historical determinants such as the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop and the impacts these have had on communities and cultural identity;
- Identify harmful and discriminatory legislation such as the Indian Act and the impact it has on Indigenous communities;
- Understand more recent events such as present-day child welfare and justice systems and how they have worked for and/or failed Indigenous communities;
- Develop an awareness of trauma-informed perspectives and practices to better understand the complex traumas faced by Indigenous communities; and
- Build an understanding of the distinct and unique contributions of Indigenous communities that make up the social fabric of Canada and a deeper understanding of the culture and resiliency of Indigenous communities.
- Develop cultural competencies that are necessary to deliver high-quality programs and services that are responsive to needs of Indigenous clients/patients<sup>31</sup>.
- Support Indigenous clients/patients to feel comfortable, respected, and able to be themselves in a care setting<sup>32</sup>.

**Table 3. adapted from Ward, Branch & Fridkin 2016<sup>33</sup>**

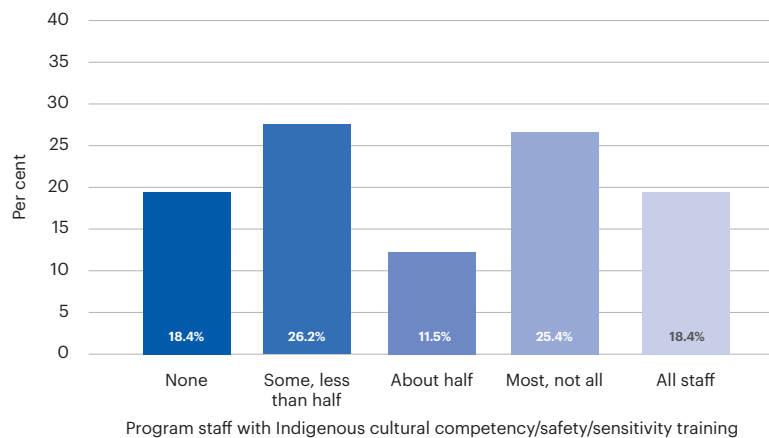
Cultural safety, sensitivity and competency	
Cultural sensitivity	An attitude that recognizes the differences between cultures and that these differences are important to acknowledge in care.
Cultural competency	An approach that focuses on practitioners attaining skills, knowledge and attitudes to work in more effective and respectful ways with Indigenous patients and people of different cultures.
Cultural safety	An approach that considers how social and historical contexts as well as structural and interpersonal power imbalances, shape experiences with the social support system.  Practitioners are self-reflective/self-aware with regards to their position of power and the impact of this role in relation to clients. "Safety" is defined by those who receive the service, not those who provide it.

As part of our research, we carried out a survey of staff at programs serving children and youth in each project location and asked, "Have any staff or volunteers at your program

taken Indigenous cultural competency, cultural safety, or cultural sensitivity training?” Respondents who answered this question included 47 program staff participants from Brant, 100 from KFL&A, 37 from KGO, and 60 from Thunder Bay, for a total of 244 programs represented.

Their answers to this question are summarized in Figure 6. The figure shows that most of the programs we surveyed had at least some training in Indigenous cultural competency, safety or sensitivity, but that it was rare for all of the staff at the programs we surveyed to be trained. Nearly half of all the programs surveyed had minimal training (none, or less than half of program staff are trained) in cultural sensitivity, safety and competency. Furthermore, of the programs indicating that they service Indigenous people almost a third of programs had minimal training in cultural sensitivity, safety and competency.

**Figure 6. Per cent of programs where none, some, or all the staff have Indigenous cultural competency, safety, or sensitivity training (n=244).**



These findings highlight both a strength and a gap in the capacity of our support system to serve Indigenous parents, children and youth. It is a strength that there are many Indigenous cultural competency, safety and sensitivity training programs out there, and that program staff are participating in them. However, it is a gap that a large proportion of program staff are not participating in these programs and lack any type of training altogether.

Furthermore, many people question the effectiveness of the training programs being delivered. Community members expressed that even in organizations where cultural training is happening it is often insufficient, and program staff are still lacking in the cultural competencies needed to help Indigenous clients feel safe. Two scoping reviews that assess the evaluation evidence of Indigenous cultural trainings in a Canadian context both conclude that few programs have been successfully implemented across Canada<sup>34, 35</sup>. Some types of training programs have been criticized for reducing the discussion to surface culture such as clothing, food and ceremonies and in doing so unintentionally causing even further

stereotyping, racialization and discrimination. To know about Indigenous people, and to know about history, doesn't necessarily create cultural safety. To create cultural safety, service providers need to recognize and understand power and privilege<sup>31</sup>.

Proponents of the concept of cultural safety argue that a focus on power structures, privilege and equity, and examining forces like racism and colonialism are imperative aspects of effective training<sup>31</sup>. Until the impacts of training on client's feelings of cultural safety are consistently measured using pre- and post- training program evaluation methods, there is little evidence of the efficacy of any program, and little capacity to learn how to improve them. There is a clear need for programs and services across sites to invest in the development and evaluation of cultural safety training programs for all staff.

*"From my perspective I think that there would be a lot of organizations that would consider themselves to be culturally safe. Yes, we've had cultural awareness training and we know the Indigenous history, and on and on. But I would be very surprised if they were culturally safe from the perspective of an Indigenous person using those services because we have structural and systemic racism so deeply entrenched in our systems that it remains completely invisible to those who have privilege, right?"*

- Service provider in Thunder Bay

## Networks Connecting Youth to Support

The networks between programs and organizations should be considered as important system strengths and community assets. When seeking services, a young person or new parent will need to find their way from their first point of contact with the system to other service providers. This can be a daunting process especially if their current service providers are not connected to the service they need next. Any future collective impact initiative should be aware of strong-points in these networks or places where there is opportunity to strengthen program connectivity. Strengthening networks between support services can help improve a child or youth's access to the breadth of supports available.

Referral systems are a key lever with which to do this. Who refers to who in the network of support services is not random. Organizations may be more likely to refer to other organizations that share some specialization, and while this could be beneficial, it may also be the case that some clients become stuck in a part of the network with organizations that only refer to each other, making it difficult for them to access the full range of services.

Within each SFS community, there were some organizations that were focused primarily on serving Indigenous populations, and others that were not. In Thunder Bay (where the proportion of Indigenous population is highest), we investigated how often these two types of organizations tend to refer clients to one another, compared with referrals between two organizations with the same population focus. Understanding these patterns can be key to finding places where Indigenous children and youth may be in danger of falling through gaps in the network of referrals.

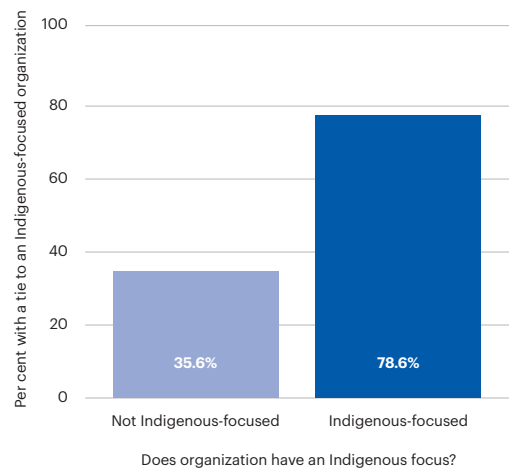
*“I mean funding agencies are always telling us that we should be doing some planning on a regional level which means that we actually have to sit down and talk and work on things together but yeah Thunder Bay doesn’t do that so it’s bad. It’s a very big challenge, yeah, we haven’t had a lot of success with that. There are some agencies that work with us all the time but there’s others that are totally unapproachable so it takes time. It takes a long time to develop those relationships and it shouldn’t be hard like that.”*

- Service provider in Thunder Bay

To create a map of referrals between services, SFS asked program staff to list up to ten other programs to whom they referred their clients, and up to ten programs from whom they receive clients. We then used this information to map out referrals between organizations.

As seen in Figure 7, our findings show that if you are an Indigenous focused organization you are likely to be giving or receiving referrals to other Indigenous-focused organizations (78.6 per cent of Indigenous focused organizations). However, for organizations not focused on serving Indigenous populations, only 35.6 per cent give or receive a referral from an Indigenous-focused organization. This demonstrates a potential disconnect between these two systems of care.

**Figure 7. Organizations with an Indigenous focus are much more likely to give/receive referrals to at least one Indigenous-focused organization.**



We can offer several possible reasons why we see this pattern. First, organizations may be more likely to refer to other organizations that share some specialization, and in this case, the organizations in our sample might simply be sharing their clients with each other because those clients have culturally specific needs that similar organizations can help address. Some of this pattern could also result from the lack of Indigenous cultural competency and safety training or stigma and discrimination in the sector. Usually the staff of Indigenous organizations have the content knowledge on effective community engagement, service needs, cultural protocols and language capacity for working with Indigenous people. Staff at Indigenous-focused organizations may not want to send their clients to these mainstream organizations, and their clients may not want to go, expecting that when they arrive, they will be not be met with culturally appropriate or culturally safe services. They may also be met with racism and discrimination, or threats to their safety. Finally, mainstream organizations may not be referring to Indigenous-focused organizations, and vice versa, because they are not well connected to them and do not have a good knowledge of the supports available at these organizations.

As a result, the concern is that Indigenous youth may not be getting access to the same breadth and range of services as non-Indigenous youth. This is a critical point. The service demands for the growing urban Indigenous youth population and young families can no longer be supported solely by Indigenous organizations, especially in communities where there are very few such organizations. The demand is too high. For equity, either more resources are needed by Indigenous organizations or non-Indigenous organizations need to improve programming for Indigenous people, and train their staff adequately in cultural safety, or service access will never evolve, and the Indigenous population will continue to be underserved.



Solutions lie both in building capacity and building relationships between organizations. If more mainstream services had culturally appropriate and culturally safe programming perhaps the Indigenous focused organizations would connect more with mainstream organizations, the referral patterns would change, and Indigenous youth would gain more access and choice in receiving supports. Having meaningful connections and shared understandings between the referring and the receiving agency can also be critical. Simply helping a client become aware of a support service may not be enough. Building relationships between programs can help program staff create effective referral processes, facilitate face-to-face connections for clients, and understand how to adequately prepare and welcome the client through a successful transition. Improving relationships and building referral processes is one way to create more effective and reliable pathways to support for vulnerable children and youth.

# Voices from the Community: Core Issues and Pathways for Change

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In order to improve our understanding of, and better serve different vulnerable populations, we need to listen to community members. The priorities and needs identified by community members should help drive the guiding principles and priorities of collective impact. The following are core issues identified by Indigenous community members across all four project locations: 1) safe spaces for Indigenous communities, and 2) improving education for Indigenous children and youth.

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## 1) Safe Spaces for Indigenous Communities

Across the four Supports for Success sites, access to more physically, psychologically and culturally safe spaces was voiced as a top priority and immediate need of Indigenous communities. In this context, a safe space is an environment where Indigenous children, youth and families:

- are not exposed to racism, discrimination, physical threat or harassment;
- feel comfortable, respected, and able to be themselves in a program or service setting; and
- access services in a way that acknowledges their unique cultures and histories as well as the systemic barriers of power and privilege that Indigenous people face.

### Physical and Psychological Safety

Physical safety and violence were prominent themes expressed by Indigenous community members. For community members in Thunder Bay, these issues were particularly prevalent and seen as critical priorities to address, especially for those living in rural areas. Indigenous women expressed feeling unsafe walking alone. This fear is largely attributed to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls crisis in Northern Ontario and stories such as those described in *Seven Fallen Feathers*<sup>36</sup>, where a series of youth attending high-school in Thunder Bay mysteriously died from 2000-2011. Youth participating in our focus groups discussed concerns around safety and shared stories of facing racially motivated, brutal attacks.

Parents and youth identified the lack of physical safety as a major barrier to accessing services and supports. Community members said that the service landscape was either too spread out or was limited to city centres and not easily accessible by rural community members without

vehicles. Often, transit systems were described as insufficient, poorly scheduled and with long wait times, leaving parents and youth feeling vulnerable in public spaces where they felt their physical safety was at risk.

For Indigenous youth, the police in Thunder Bay were also viewed as posing a threat to physical safety. Many youth indicated they have experienced extremely violent interactions with the police, including physical violence, racist slurs and threats. Police are supposed to protect and serve. However, for Indigenous communities in Thunder Bay we heard that relationships with the police were closely linked to concerns of racism and fears for their personal physical safety.

Issues with trust, with regards to child welfare organizations in particular, was also seen as a cross-site theme that is linked to physical safety. Across sites, we heard of fears of losing children to the child welfare system and of a history of babies being taken away from their mothers at birth. As a result, community members report an intense stigma associated with organizations that offer child welfare services. This results in a hesitancy, and more often, unwillingness to use the available services that are in place to help and support parents and young children. This stigma can affect access to a variety of important services and supports, even those that are not linked to child welfare organizations. For example, in KGO, service providers told us that many community members are reluctant to access their services because of the misconception that they are automatically affiliated with child welfare organizations.

The intergenerational trauma caused by colonization was also described as posing an ongoing threat to the physical and psychological safety of Indigenous communities. For example, the reservation system, the legacy of residential schools, and the child welfare system are all places where Indigenous children, youth and families have faced and continue to face physical violence, abuse, cultural oppression, racism and discrimination. The impacts of intergenerational trauma are diverse and touch many aspects of life. Youth in KFL&A described how learning about Canada's history of oppression toward Indigenous people is a traumatizing experience that youth have trouble coming to terms with. Many youth internalize feelings of blame and low self-worth perpetuated by society. In Thunder Bay, service providers explain that the impacts of intergenerational trauma manifest through high rates of mental health problems in youth, stemming from broader issues surrounding a lack of supportive relationships, lack of connection with culture, and lack of connection to community. In KGO, service providers explain that many of these impacts of intergenerational trauma (alcoholism, addictions, depression) prevent members from being involved in the community and can serve as a barrier for youth in advancing education and skills. Community members spoke about how their own experiences influenced their knowledge as a parent and their ability to take care of their children, while youth expressed a similar sentiment with parents or grandparents who attended residential schools.

*“The MMIW and the murdered Indigenous missing women piece, like that’s a huge part of who we are and what we see on the news. We read it almost every day and then you see how that profile just; all the head women just quit and got out of there and they got fired so, well what message does that send to the rest of us when you know, we’re like, Thunder Bay is known for those places ... we all know where those things happen. How do you reconcile that, you know, or how do you feel safe in your own area when that’s also, or you don’t feel safe in places.”*

- Youth in Thunder Bay

## Cultural Safety

The need for cultural safety is often based on the negative experiences many Indigenous populations face when accessing mainstream services in their communities. Negative experiences are directly related to the lack of culturally safe and appropriate service provision and the resulting feelings of fear, mistrust and social exclusion. We have heard from the community that negative experiences have included racism, difficulties in accessing health benefits (e.g. pharmacies that won’t accept their status cards), service providers being unable to connect with Indigenous worldviews, and a lack of representative staff and culturally relevant programs.

Themes of racism emerged in all four sites. Community members pointed to experiencing racism and discrimination at all levels of the service system. This has led to a mistrust and fear of services and to a reluctance in accessing available services. In Brant and KFL&A, racism manifests through bullying in public schools and high schools, where Indigenous youth explain that they are mocked for their skin tones and ‘savage culture’. Many feel distressed navigating situations in which their friends hold discriminatory and stereotypical views toward Indigenous culture and experience an emotional toll when educating peers. Youth and service providers in KFL&A describe this as subtle and quiet type of racism, that ties back to a history of class division and British colonialism. Youth in KGO express frustrations with discrimination experienced within institutions, particularly education, housing and healthcare where they find difficulty accessing resources because of their Aboriginal status. Similarly, in Thunder Bay, youth recount incidences of institutional racism attending services and racial profiling at therapy or within hospitals (e.g. symptoms are not taken seriously). Racism in Thunder Bay is also very closely linked with physical safety. There are instances of youth being attacked while walking alone at night for their Indigeneity, while cases of extreme police brutality and discrimination toward Indigenous youth are not rare (See Physical and Psychological safety section).

Across the province, we heard that many families are still reluctant to self-identify as First Nation, Métis or Inuit because of systemic racism and oppression by authorities in health, education, child care and judicial systems. Even when opportunities exist, Indigenous community members expressed not feeling safe enough to take advantage of them.

*“One of the biggest issues has been where to go if you don’t already have connections in the community. You don’t know Indigenous parents who share your grief and the question is how to find them. Where do you bring your kids? Who do you turn to for any kind of services, where you feel safe to identifying your background?”*

- Parent in KFL&A

## Opportunities to connect with Culture, Language and Land

Community members pointed out that issues of physical, psychological and cultural safety are connected to a lack of opportunities to connect with culture, language and land. Land, culture and language are important for the health and well-being of the Indigenous community. Connection to land and the revitalization of culture and language have been well documented in research as critical for healing, resilience and improving health outcomes across Indigenous communities<sup>29,37</sup>. In our feedback sessions with youth in Brant, we heard that opportunities to learn about their culture and language reminded them of their purpose, who they truly are, and allowed them to realize their strengths and transition well into adulthood. In addition, community members voiced that many youth have experienced identity crises from a lack of connection to culture and that there are limited resources around Indigenous teachings to provide for their children (e.g. pow wows), particularly in KFL&A. Despite its importance, decades of forced assimilation have eroded opportunities for Indigenous children and youth to connect with their land, culture and language.

Across all four sites, we heard that there are often no central welcome spaces for the Indigenous communities and inconsistent funding for Indigenous programs. This was especially prominent in our discussions across KFL&A. In KFL&A we heard that children and youth are in need of spaces where they can feel safe, trust in services and where they can build positive relationships with their families, communities, their land and with themselves. For many Indigenous communities who have been taught to feel ashamed or embarrassed of their identity having a place to reconnect with culture can help develop a stronger sense of identity, well-being, purpose, and a heightened sense of community and belonging.

*“We’ve lost that connection with ourselves and what is our purpose... continuous cultural connection is essential to our identities and who we are. We need to take risks to make a community.”*

- Youth in KFL&A

## **Pathways to System Change: Safe Spaces**

Many organizations have made a conscious effort to address the lack of physical, psychological and cultural safety for Indigenous people in mainstream programs and service systems. However, the reality remains that many Indigenous children, youth and their families are not safe when accessing services and as a result their health and well-being are suffering.

Through our discussion groups, community members consistently indicated that creating safe spaces calls for a fundamental system change. Here are some of the recommendations that came out of our discussions with parents, youth, service providers and community leaders.

### **1. Fundamental system-wide change in how mainstream programs and services (e.g. health, education, social services) are designed, structured and delivered to better serve the Indigenous community.**

#### **Practical actions we heard from community:**

- Invest in culturally appropriate spaces, programs and services, and require all staff to complete cultural safety training;
- Build off the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls for Action to begin to address the impacts of intergenerational trauma and history of oppression;
- Develop real relationships with Indigenous children, youth, parents and community and leverage Indigenous knowledge at all levels of system planning and service delivery;
- Commit to meaningful and sustainable Indigenous engagement and oversight on all relevant programs and services.

### **2. Improve transportation and access to programs and services.**

#### **Practical actions we heard from community:**

- Improve transit systems so that all community members can access the programs and services they need in a timely and safe manner;
- Implement an Indigenous youth hub where youth can access safe services and do not have to commute to multiple different places to do so;
- Build services and treatment centres in more convenient, easily accessible locations;

- Invest in Indigenous advocates who could support children, youth and families in navigating programs and services.

### 3. **Increase the capacity and funding for Indigenous, population-focused organizations, programs, services, supports and practices.**

#### **Practical actions we heard from community:**

- Reduce barriers Indigenous people experience to engaging in cultural practices within existing institutions (e.g. smudging inside buildings);
- Invest in Indigenous governed and Indigenous led systems of services programs, specifically related to early childhood development and health. This could include providing funds to re-design existing spaces;
- Build language centres where people can go to learn and practice their language as well as engage in other cultural practices and programming.

## 2) Improving Education for Indigenous Children and Youth

The education system in Canada and Ontario has historically been an unsafe place for Indigenous families. The residential school system separated children from their families, was known for abuse, and attempted to erase Indigenous culture and practices, all of which have had lasting effects on Indigenous people and their experience with the education system today.

Through our discussion groups and interviews we heard from youth, parents and service providers about experiences related to the education system and how it – as a whole system - can be improved. We heard that the education system can be improved by better incorporating Indigenous culture, language, history, pedagogy and traditional knowledge, addressing barriers related to educational transitions, and creating opportunities to build life skills and supportive relationships within schools.

### **Cultural history, learning and ways of knowing**

A primary component of the education system is its curriculum and testing practices. Youth and service providers expressed frustrations with traditional school curriculums indicating that they reinforce dominant views of history and praise historical figures that were active in promoting residential school systems. Frustration over the emphasis on Western ways of learning and knowing was also expressed by parents and service providers. Many teachers do not have knowledge of or experience using culturally appropriate teaching techniques. As well, tests such as the EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office tests) do not take into account cultural or linguistic diversity which affects children's ability to do well on commonly used measures of academic achievement.

Parents also discussed how opportunities to learn about Indigenous customs, language and culture are lacking or fragmented throughout the education system. For example, a parent in KGO explained that Indigenous language education is available through a pre-kindergarten program but is not available through her child's elementary school until grade four, creating gaps in language learning and a risk of losing the language. Parents expressed that access to cultural knowledge and language was a right, and that there was a need to better include and deliver this in the education system through Indigenous or non-biased teachers.

*"... all that stuff they talk about like United Nations rights for Indigenous people. I don't know the short form for it but I mean, we have a right so that our kids can learn that cultural knowledge...the whole School Board should be taking that very seriously."*

- Parent in Thunder Bay

## Transitions through the Education System

Many Indigenous youth are ambitious and want to succeed in school. However, parents and service providers highlighted that it is difficult for children and youth to do so because of institutional barriers in the education system. Children who live on reserves often attend elementary schools under federal jurisdiction, which are unequally funded and under-resourced, in comparison to the schools under provincial jurisdiction. First Nations also do not often have secondary schools and as a result, students must travel into large, urban cities to obtain a secondary school education. When youth leave First Nations communities, they exit the federal school system and enter into private or provincial school systems.

Service providers discussed how the quality of education between federal and provincial systems can make the transition to secondary school difficult. Because schools under the federal jurisdiction are under-resourced Indigenous children often do not receive the same quality of education as others, creating gaps in knowledge and skills.

In addition, many Indigenous youth experience mental health and addiction issues, intergenerational traumas and family crises. Service providers discussed how teachers are ill-equipped to deal with such issues, while schools and educational institutions tend to reinforce colonial and discriminatory viewpoints. Parents and service providers explained that these issues can affect youth's school attendance. Low school attendance can create further gaps in knowledge and skills and affect student's transition to subsequent levels of education, including post-secondary education.

Many youth and parents discussed the need for more educational supports to help students with educational transitions. While supports such as guidance counsellors, attendance



counsellors, tutors and after-school programs exist across all sites, many indicated that they were under-resourced and unable to adequately meet student's needs. Youth and service providers also noted issues around financial assistance, including long waits to be approved for funding, the need for more funding and how failure to complete a year at college or university can put students in significant debt, preventing them from reaching and completing post-secondary education.

*“But I think people are missing this piece here which is if you’re coming from communities where school was not at all like it is here ... and even then when kids are not able to meet certain ... benchmarks then they’re already slotted into, you know, an area of you’re not really going to succeed and we push you through to grade nine. And then in grade nine now your real challenges start. And basically it’s like, okay, well, I’m just going to be absent and, you know, go a few times then next time...”*  
– Service provider in KGO

## Opportunities for Building Skills and Supportive Relationships

Youth, parents and service providers discussed the need for opportunities to build life skills within education, including practical skills such as financing and renting and softer skills related to professional development and building healthy relationships. Intergenerational traumas and competing priorities can affect parent's ability to teach children and youth these vital life skills, and community identified that the education system can help ensure youth have the skills they need to succeed. For youth who leave their community to pursue education in larger cities, there is even a greater need for the education system to play this role. In Thunder Bay for example, youth from northern communities often fly into the city to attend secondary school. For the most part, this involves leaving their strong connections to family, extended family and clan to stay in boarding homes with people they do not know. Here they receive varying levels of support and guidance. It is often their first time on their own, as well as their first time in a large city, leaving youth as young as thirteen to learn and navigate a lot.

Youth, parents and service providers also discussed how the education system could help to facilitate supportive relationships for youth. Parents and service providers discussed how schools can better engage and communicate with them so that they are aware of challenges their children experience in school and can learn how to best support them. Youth also discussed and expressed a desire for mentorship opportunities in school. Peer-mentorship opportunities were described favourably as youth find peers easier to connect and relate to and are less paternalistic and power-laden in nature.

*“They need life skills, like I find they’re just so unprepared for life. Right, like they come from a home where maybe they didn’t- you know, they don’t know the basics, even like from budgeting to cooking, you know what I mean? And then they come into a city and then they’ve got the issues of education because...they’re at a different level, you know, academically...”*

- Service provider in Thunder

## Pathways to System Change: Education

Through our discussion groups and interviews, we heard the need to improve the education system for Indigenous children and youth as a priority concern for communities.

Here are some of the recommendations that came out of our discussions with parents, youth, service providers and community leaders.

### 1. Increase and provide consistent opportunities for diverse learnings of Indigenous history, culture, language and ways of knowing throughout the education system.

#### Practical actions we heard from community:

- Standardize Indigenous history and current issues in the curriculum to ensure that it is available in all schools. That way, if students switch schools, they will not lose the opportunity to learn this subject;
- Increase opportunities to learn and practice language and knowledge within schools such as moccasin making, beading and land-based activities. This might involve bringing community members such as Elders and community programming into schools;
- Ensure that existing opportunities to learn and practice language and culture within schools are implemented consistently and that children, youth and parents are aware of these opportunities;
- Implement cultural safety and cultural bias training for all teachers and school staff;
- Change the design and administration of EQAO assessments to ensure they are inclusive of the cultural, linguistic and geographic diversity of Indigenous children and youth;
- Use alternative teaching methods that build off students’ strengths and account for different ways of knowing.

### 2. Coordinate and align federal, provincial and private school systems to support more effective transitions for Indigenous youth.

#### Practical actions we heard from community:

- Ensure that academic requirements and quality of education are comparable between school boards and Indigenous learning centers to ensure students can transition successfully between systems.

**3. Invest in programs, services and training both within school and the broader community that focus on supporting youth through educational transitions.**

**Practical actions we heard from community:**

- Provide training to teachers on how they can best support youth who may be experiencing inter-generational traumas, family violence, mental health and additions issues;
- Increase community tutoring supports for children and youth and ensure these supports are affordable to low-income families;
- Improve school's community outreach model to better connect students to programs and services in the community.

**4. Integrate life skills education into school curricula and implement strategies to better engage parents in their children's education.**

**Practical actions we heard from community:**

- Include the following subjects in life skills education: financing, housing/renting, taxes, cooking, professional development and healthy relationship building;
- Implement parent information sessions as the beginning of each school year to explain what kind of supports are available and needed to help students succeed in school;
- Support parents in accessing and attending opportunities to be involved in their child's education (e.g. transportation to information sessions or schools' parent council meetings). Ensure that when parents attend such opportunities that their voices are listened to, respected and acted upon;
- Support family learning by developing programs for adults/parents on how to support children and youth in their education. Ensure these programs are accessible and flexible so adults/parents are able to attend.

## Conclusions: A Way Forward

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Despite a widespread system of supports, many vulnerable children and youth are not getting the support they need. In our [SFS Summary Report](#), we outline an expanded model of collective impact that incorporates three key approaches from successful initiatives around the world for improving outcomes for marginalized children and youth, including:

1. a strengths-based model focused on building successful outcomes for children and youth;
2. a life-course approach that aims to create a continuum of support from cradle to career; and
3. working towards an understanding of the strengths and needs of diverse and marginalized youth.

In this report we expanded further on the third approach – to better understand diverse and marginalized youth - and dug deeper into evidence that can help build a broad understanding of the needs and strengths of these youth, as well as the strengths, barriers and opportunities in the systems supporting these youth.

Our findings in this report focus on Indigenous communities across Ontario. However, we hope that the lessons drawn from this work can be generalized to consider systems change and targeted solutions to benefit other marginalized groups, including youth who are newcomers, LGBTQ, racialized, living in poverty, living with disabilities or living in rural settings.

### Evidence to Drive Change: Summary of Findings

The evidence presented in this report shows that Indigenous children and youth face disparities when it comes to social and developmental outcomes such as employment, education, health and mental health outcomes. These disparities are the result of deep-rooted systemic issues such as widespread racism, a history of colonization causing inter-generational traumas and systemic inequities caused by Canadian policies such as those embedded in the Indian Act. These underlying issues must be widely recognized addressed to realize change in social outcomes for Indigenous communities.

To support well-being for children and youth, there are important community assets and strengths that Indigenous communities draw from. We heard from Indigenous community members about the value of culture, collective identity, community, land, language, and relationships with Elders and Knowledge Keepers as core community strengths that build resilience, facilitate healing, and foster well-being and self-determination. We heard about services with culturally safe and culturally appropriate programming that are important

sources of support for Indigenous children, youth and families. While these culturally appropriate services are very successful in supporting Indigenous communities, the availability of these resources rarely meet the demand, and many people get left behind without access.

Cultural safety, competency and sensitivity training is another important asset for organizations who serve Indigenous children and youth. The most effective programs strive towards cultural safety, and curriculum focuses on power, privilege, equity, de-colonization and anti-racism. However, when we looked at cultural safety, sensitivity and competency training across the system of services for children and youth, not enough program and service staff have participated in these trainings to make a meaningful system-wide impact.

Furthermore, community members expressed doubts about the efficacy of the variety of programs available and call for consistent program evaluation and development. Another important asset for systems supporting children and youth, is the relationships between different supports, programs and organizations. In a case study in one of our four project sites (Thunder Bay), our social network analysis findings showed that Indigenous-focused and mainstream programs are not as well connected with each other as they could be. As a result, Indigenous youth may not be getting access to the full breadth of services available.

When we talked with Indigenous community members, they articulated the core issues and pathways forward for improving their local support systems. Two core issues emerged across sites:

- 1) A lack of physically, psychologically and culturally safe spaces; and
- 2) The education system lacks capacity to successfully serve the Indigenous population.

Community members pointed to several actionable solutions for fundamental systems change to improve our ability to support Indigenous parents, children and youth.

To create physically, psychologically and culturally safe spaces:

1. Fundamental system-wide change in how mainstream programs and services (e.g. health, education, social services) are designed, structured and delivered to better serve the Indigenous community.
2. Improve transportation and access to programs and services.
3. Increase the capacity and funding for Indigenous, population-focused organizations, programs, services, supports and practices.

To improve our education system:

4. Increase and provide consistent opportunities for diverse learnings of Indigenous history, culture, language and ways of knowing throughout the education system.

5. Coordinate and align federal, provincial and private school systems to support more effective transitions for Indigenous youth.
6. Invest in programs, services and training both within schools and in the broader community that focus on supporting Indigenous youth through educational transitions.
7. Integrate life skills education into school curricula and implement strategies to better engage parents in their children's education.

These seven community recommendations are important action items, not just for improving the quality and access of programs and services for Indigenous children and youth but can be seen as starting point for thinking through the improvement of conditions for other diverse and marginalized communities as well.

## Building Inclusive Systems Change

Ontario has already invested in collective impact initiatives across the province in an effort to transform our systems of support to work for our most vulnerable populations. However, funding often falls short and political will is changeable. Rarely are there dedicated investments into the important task of understanding and involving the diverse and marginalized communities that these initiatives are meant to help. As a result, key players and the important knowledge of lived experience get left out of the collective impact process, and the goals and interventions designed are not as effective as they could be at improving outcomes for these populations. Many of these projects do not achieve the intended impact or simply fizzle out.

A key part of the SFS collective impact vision is that the families, children and youth whose outcomes we aim to change must be equal leaders in the process, along-side funders and service providers. The priorities and values of community members should guide every step of the collective impact process, from the development of guiding principles to deciding on shared goals; and from intervention development to implementation design. Including diverse and marginalized communities at every step and level of the collective impact process is critical for creating systems change that better supports vulnerable children and youth.

In order to spearhead such a program, we have the following recommendation for the province:

**Develop a framework for involving diverse and marginalized communities in the collective impact process by piloting a capacity building strategy for collective impact initiatives in Thunder Bay, Brant, KGO and KFL&A.**

These capacity building pilot projects should occur within the context of local collective impact initiatives (such as the life-course based collective impact pilot recommended in our [Summary Report](#)). They should be of sufficient length to allow for them to be properly evaluated. We believe it is necessary to have at least 3 years of funding and support to see

results and sustainability. Pilot projects should include following characteristics and activities:

a) include four levels of capacity building and training:

1. local service providers;
2. funders;
  - Capacity building activities for both local service providers and funders should include cultural competency, sensitivity and safety training reflective of the diversity of the local community. Cultural training focus on building cultural safety through curriculum focused on power, privilege, equity, de-colonization and anti-racist pedagogy<sup>31</sup>. This aspect of the capacity building must be adequately funded and led by local cultural Knowledge Keepers and leaders, who are experts in the field of cultural safety training.
3. community members (including youth and parents).
  - Capacity building activities for local community members (especially youth and parents from local marginalized communities) should include training, work experience and leadership opportunities within the collective impact process. Providing this for marginalized youth and parents, will help level the playing field and promote equity in community development processes. The inclusion of community perspectives will also greatly improve the capacity to create meaningful and sustainable interventions that reduce local inequities.
4. all stakeholder levels
  - Capacity building for all stakeholders involved (service providers, funders and community members) should include funding for each group to dedicate time to participating in the collective impact process, as well as training to provide a practical understanding of the collective impact model, the life-course approach and tools for facilitation, intervention design and implementation. Training for all stakeholders should also include tools to ensure that programs are designed within an equity framework, such as the [Health Equity Impact Assessment](#).
  - Capacity building should also include engaging and promoting participation from the broad community serving and funding services for children, youth and families. The range of actors involved in collective impact is important. Service providers should be understood as including organizations ranging from frontline service organizations (such as schools, health centres, recreational programs, community centres, and childcare organizations) to higher-level administrative institutions such as school boards, Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs), and government departments overseeing service provision policy and funding.
  - Bringing people together and building relationships will also be critical. Community building activities should be designed to build relationships between local service providers, funders and community members; as well as between disconnected organizations, especially between mainstream organizations and organizations serving specific marginalized communities.

- b) when co-developing interventions, as a starting point, use community recommendations for creating safe spaces and improving the education system for diverse and marginalized youth (see Pathways to System Change: Safe Spaces, and Pathways to Systems Change: Education).
- c) carry out a developmental evaluation process that builds expertise about the best tools, processes and strategies for carrying out capacity building and engaging marginalized communities in collective impact.
- d) develop a policy framework for ensuring a commitment to the inclusion of marginalized communities in collective impact initiatives across the province.

With evidence to drive change, effective strategies for creating change, and the voice of community members guiding us, it is possible to revitalize our systems of support so that all our children and youth are equipped for success when they reach adulthood.



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