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Commentary

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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
FACULTY OF NATIVE STUDIES

Aboriginal Affairs and
Northern Development Canada

Affaires autochtones et
Développement du Nord Canada

Research Report: Background for an Inuit Children and Youth Strategy for Ontario

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Executive Summary

Background

In recent years there has been a migration of Inuit to urban centres in Canada, including those within Ontario. This shift has precipitated a growing need for culturally appropriate programs to address health and education issues among Inuit living in urban areas.

The Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services has been directed by Cabinet to develop recommendations for a provincial Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy. The primary focus of the Strategy is to improve outcomes for First Nations, Métis, Inuit and urban Aboriginal children and youth.

Inuit children in Canada face many socioeconomic challenges that limit their ability to reach their full potential. Addressing those challenges and ensuring that Inuit and all aboriginal children in Canada have the best possible health services must become a national priority.

Our children and youth need better access to existing services. There must be more culturally appropriate services available, and there must be more community-based solutions that enable greater community control over services for Inuit children and youth. We are beginning to see in urban centres the growth of culturally appropriate services developed and administered locally, and we must build on the success of these programs.

Canada's Child Health Declaration sums this up well: *"To reach their potential, children need to grow up in a place where they can thrive – spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically and intellectually – and get high-quality healthcare when they need it. That place must have three fundamental elements: a safe and secure environment, good health and development, and a full range of health resources available to all.... First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children must be offered equal opportunities as other Canadian children through culturally relevant resources."*

Aboriginal people have a long and proven history in designing and developing programs best suited to their communities. This is the model that must be followed as we consider the future for our children and youth in Ontario.

Mary Simon, Chair, National Committee on Inuit Education.

The Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre (OICC) and Tungasuvvingat Inuit (TI) were asked to prepare recommendations for the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services about a provincial Inuit Children and Youth Strategy. As background to this, OICC undertook a research and community engagement process. This included a literature review of promising practices specifically related to working with Inuit children and youth; census information about the Inuit population in Ontario; focus groups and a survey with 49 Inuit youth in Ottawa; focus groups and a survey with 71 parents of Inuit children and youth; and interviews or a survey with 27 service providers across Ontario who work with Inuit children or youth.

The Inuit population in Ontario, although small, is growing very rapidly. According to the National Household Survey, there were 3,360 Inuit living in Ontario in 2011. These numbers probably underestimate the Inuit population to a considerable degree, as Inuit agencies in Ottawa estimated the actual numbers to be almost three times the figure identified by the 2006 census. The Inuit population in the province rose by 48 percent from 2001 to 2006 and 65 percent from 2006 to 2011. If this pattern continues, there will be over 15,000 Inuit in Ontario in just over 10 years from now, even by the (probably underestimated) official figures.

This is also a very young population, with a tremendous need for child and youth services. Nearly four in ten (38 percent in 2006 and 36 percent in 2011) were 14 years of age and under, which is a higher proportion than that for Ontarians in general, and also higher than that for either First Nation or Métis populations.

General Inuit Population in Ontario

Inuit in Ontario constitute a small but very fast-growing population. According to the National Household Survey (NHS), there were 3,360 Inuit living in Ontario in 2011,¹ constituting about one percent of the Aboriginal population in Ontario (MAA). This is up from 2,035 in 2006 (Census, MAA), an increase of 65 percent in five years. Inuit numbers had also increased in the previous five years, by 48 percent from 2001 to 2006 (Census, MAA). If this pattern continues, there will be over 15,000 Inuit in Ontario in just over 10 years from now. This dramatic increase is not due to the birth rate alone – many Inuit move to Ontario from the North each year, and a greater number of Inuit already here may now be identifying themselves as Inuit in the census and NHS.

These numbers probably underestimate the Inuit population to a considerable degree. For example, in Ottawa, the 2006 census pegged the Inuit population at 645, but Inuit agencies in the city estimated that a more accurate number would be 1,800. It is also important to note that the controversial decision of the federal government to suspend the mandatory Long Form Census and replace it with the voluntary National Household Survey (NHS) was strongly criticized by statistical experts. One of the main concerns with the NHS was that it would lead to high levels of underreporting by certain groups in the

¹ This is Inuit only identity, that is, it excludes people who are Inuit and First Nations, or Inuit and Métis.

population, and these experts specifically mentioned Aboriginal people as likely to be underreported. For example, the 2006 Census reported 32 Inuit in Timmins, whereas the 2011 NHS reported none; of course, this is possible, but with such high growth rates, it is more likely that underreporting is the issue here. The actual numbers of Inuit in Ontario may thus be dramatically higher than the numbers officially reported by Statistics Canada.

Setting aside concerns about the accuracy of the overall numbers, what the data does provide is a rough sense of the distribution of Inuit across the province. In 2006, 82 percent of Ontario Inuit lived in urban areas (Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, based on census data). There are 43 Census Agglomerations (CAs) in Ontario, which are generally urban areas, and data from the 2011 NHS reveals the following information:

- 26 CAs have an Inuit population of zero (including Timmins, which had 32 in the 2006 Census);
- 12 CAs have between zero and 100 Inuit;
- five CAs have over 100 Inuit: Ottawa-Gatineau (860), Toronto (640), Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo (225), St. Catharines-Niagara (190), and Oshawa (125). Note: In the 2006 Census, Ottawa reported having 645 and Toronto 320 Inuit. It is difficult to know the extent to which the 2011 data is due to changes in the Inuit populations of the two cities or to differences in data collection methods between the 2011 NHS and the 2006 Census.
- Ontario CAs have a total Inuit population of 2,610, which means that 750 Inuit live in rural areas of Ontario outside these CAs.

Inuit Children and Youth

Inuit are a very young population. In 2006, nearly four in ten (38 percent) were 14 years of age and under, compared to 23 percent of the First Nations population and 18 percent of Métis. In Ontario, 34 percent of Inuit were 14 years and under, and 29 percent were under the age of 13. In Ontario, 56 percent of Inuit were under 25 years of age. This pattern was still true in 2011, when 36 percent of Inuit in Ontario were 0–14 years of age.

Inuit children outside of Inuit Nunangat are more likely to have multiple siblings than other Canadian children. For example, twice as many Inuit families (16 percent) have four children as other Canadian families (eight percent). Also, Inuit children are more likely to live with two parents compared with other Aboriginal children.²

School boards in Ontario are beginning to invite their Aboriginal students to self-identify. In the Ottawa District School Board, 181 students have identified as Inuit out of 1500 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students in total. The Ottawa Catholic School Board declined to separate out numbers for Inuit, but has a total of approximately 600 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students who have self-identified. However, as one principal in a school with a significant Inuit population pointed out, there are many more who do not identify.

² Statistics Canada. 2008. *Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006: Family, Community and Child Care* (Catalogue no. 89-634-X - No. 001). Ottawa ON: Statistics Canada.

Inuit in Ontario have a high-school completion rate of 59 percent (compared to over 80 percent among the general population), and seven percent have a university degree. Inuit are less likely than Métis but more likely than First Nations to have completed high school, and to have completed a Bachelor's degree. (Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs).

Gaps and Barriers

1. **Safe self-identification:** Currently, many Inuit youth and families hesitate to declare their cultural background because of the negative stereotypes and racism they have encountered.
2. **Lack of cultural competence and cultural safety:** Service providers know little or nothing about Inuit culture. The cultural identity and sense of self of Inuit children and youth are not respected, acknowledged or supported in any conscious way, and many actions of the service provider may actually undermine the cultural well-being of the child or youth. The only exceptions youth and parents highlighted were Inuit organizations, and selected service providers that have made a significant effort to consciously reflect and honour Inuit culture as distinct from both mainstream and First Nation or Métis cultures.
3. **Bullying and violence:** Youth and parents described incidents of bullying, particularly at school, and violence directed against Inuit children and youth.
4. **Systems designed on non-Inuit cultural assumptions:** Many of the service systems are designed on the basis of assumptions that are not consistent with Inuit values and life experience, e.g., most services are highly individualistic, while the Inuit culture is built around the extended family and community.
5. **Lack of continuity and coordination among services:** Parents indicated numerous challenges in dealing with the complexity of the service system. Navigating one of these systems, such as education or health, is difficult. When parents have to deal with several systems, it can be overwhelming.
6. **Lack of Inuit-specific services:** Parents and service providers commented on the uniqueness of Inuit culture and practices, and the distinctions between Inuit and other Aboriginal peoples. The lack of Inuit-specific services is seen as a major shortcoming.

Outcomes

Parents and youth identified the following outcomes they would like to see:

- Inuit children and youth growing up in a society that acknowledges and celebrates Inuit culture. *“To be in a place in which you are accepted for who you are, you are nurtured and cared for and you are valuable.”* - Youth

- Inuit children and youth feeling safe and protected, and growing up free from violence, racism, prejudice and bullying. *“To live a good life, one should know who they are and where they come from, have access to services and live life not worrying about negative stigmas.”* - Youth
- Inuit children and youth having access to their culture. [A good life is] *“Family, friends, education and Inuit culture.”* - Youth
- Inuit children and youth knowing who they are, being proud to be Inuk, and being comfortable walking in both worlds – Inuit and mainstream.
- Inuit children and youth having a strong connection to the land.
- The Inuktitut language thriving in Ontario.
- Inuit children and youth growing up in strong, Inuit-positive families and surrounded by a caring community. *“Kids thrive if parents thrive.”* - Parent
- Inuit children and youth leading healthy, active lives. *“As soon as you say ‘country food,’ boom! - everybody is there.”* - Aboriginal service provider
- Inuit children and youth having the confidence and the skills to thrive in whatever way of life they choose for themselves. *“I want them to be able to say ‘I can do this’.”* - Parent
- Inuit families having the means to provide their children and youth with safe and adequate housing and a decent standard of living.

Promising Practices in Providing Services for Inuit Children and Youth

The literature review identified 17 promising practices in providing services to Inuit children and youth, which are listed very briefly below. Parents, youth, and service providers supported all 17 practices.

1. **Inuit-driven:** Inuit are best-placed to identify and understand their own needs, and to define services, programs, policies and research.
2. **Inuit-specific services:** Inuit have a distinct culture and history that is different from those of First Nations and Métis, and it is important that this be reflected in services.
3. **Community involvement:** in Inuit communities, more effective solutions to problems arise when community members come together to create solutions.
4. **Youth engagement:** Involvement of youth in creating, planning and delivering youth programs is seen as an essential practice for effective results.
5. **Based on Inuit culture and values:** The inclusion of cultural teachings and traditions is an important element of programs and services for Inuit children and youth. The Inuit holistic view of health and human development can offer strength, balance, control over one’s life, and social resources to support a well-rounded life.

6. **Involvement of Elders:** Elders have a key role as the carriers of Inuit culture and teachers of Inuit values.
7. **Land-based activities:** Inuit paradigms of wellness are closely linked to one's relationship to the land, and land-based activities are one way to involve children and youth in healthy and culturally relevant activities.
8. **Traditional practices and foods:** Integrating traditional knowledge, practices, food and celebrations.
9. **Use of Inuit language:** Language embodies the culture, and use of Inuit languages in services and programs is a strength.
10. **Family involvement:** Families (including extended family members) play an essential role in Inuit society, and services to children and youth need to include and support families.
11. **Parental supports:** Parents play a fundamental role in ensuring the well-being of their children and preparing them to live a good life.
12. **Recognition of complex needs:** A significant number of Inuit children are dealing with complex challenges, including a history of trauma, speech and language difficulties, FASD, autism, learning disabilities and other special needs.
13. **Holistic approach:** Recognition of the health and social context of Inuit children and youth, including housing, income, history of trauma, racism, bullying, food security, etc.
14. **Strength and resilience-based approaches:** Elders speak of Inuit cultural teachings that create resiliency. Traditional Inuit society also values the abilities of each individual and their contributions to the common good.
15. **Inuit staff:** Inuit staff can provide important added value in the delivery of services by integrating and modeling cultural values and practices in the program, and linking the services to the Inuit community.
16. **Cultural competency and safety:** Training for service providers to provide culturally competent and culturally safe services for Inuit children and youth.
17. **Service collaboration and integration:** Community partnerships and collaboration are an essential part of providing high-quality services to Inuit children and youth.

Improving Services

An Inuit-specific service system is essential for providing the programs and services, coordination and cultural safety that Inuit children and youth in Ontario need. The next stage of work will include the following steps:

1. Create a provincial Inuit organization to oversee Inuit-specific service delivery throughout the province, and to provide expert consultation, training and resource materials to Aboriginal and mainstream services working with Inuit children and youth.
2. Expand and improve services in Ottawa where the community has articulated a range of specific and urgent needs including the following:
 - Education system: Expand the Bridging the Gap program; create Inuit-specific education program for grades 1–12; ensure the cultural competence of educators; and support youth pursuing post-secondary education.
 - Youth programs: Provide culturally-based prevention and resiliency programs, mentoring, and drop-in programs.
 - Healthcare system: Create at least one Inuit medical advocate /navigator / liaison worker to support parents/children /youth; provide culturally safe mental health services for Inuit youth; and consider operating one or more Inuit-specific group homes.
 - Child welfare: Revise the PRIDE and SAFE programs to be culturally appropriate; expand the Circle of Care program as effective; recruit Inuit foster and adoptive parents; and designate the Ottawa Inuit community as a “native community” for purposes of the Child and Family Service Act, including choosing an Inuit agency to represent the community in child welfare matters.
3. Establish Inuit-specific services in Toronto:
 - Provide organizational support and capacity-building to the group of Inuit community members in Toronto that wishes to establish Inuit children’s services.
 - Work with Native Child and Family Services (NCFS) to strengthen the availability of Inuit child-welfare services, including providing cultural supports such as Elders, interpreters, cultural teachers, ceremonies and other supports, and possibly including assigning a staff person of an Inuit agency to work out of NCFS.
 - Work with school board officials to explore the need for a Bridging the Gap program in schools where there is a significant Inuit student population.
 - Work with Sick Kids Hospital to explore the need for an Inuit liaison worker for system navigation and advocacy with the healthcare system, including mental health services.
 - Organize community events to gather Inuit in the city, assess needs, and build capacity to design and deliver services in the future.
 - Consider a satellite operation in Oshawa and/or Hamilton, where population data suggest there may be a significant number of Inuit.

4. Establish Inuit-specific services in other communities over time, when the population and need warrant it.
5. Work with Aboriginal agencies serving Inuit children and youth in communities where there are no Inuit-specific services, to ensure cultural competence and cultural safety. Some of these agencies have already established collaborative relationships with Inuit organizations to this end.
6. Ensure seamless services for children and youth moving between Ontario and the North, especially Nunavut, including effective transition planning between services in Nunavut and services in Ontario and cultural supports and advocacy for all Inuit children and youth arriving in Ontario, and ensuring that children from the North continue their education while they are temporarily in Ontario.
7. Address social determinants of Inuit child and youth well-being, including developing a public awareness initiative to improve understanding of the Inuit, specific strategies that can help Inuit families move out of poverty, and housing options for Inuit youth who may be in need of a culturally safe community environment in which to live (e.g., those at risk of homelessness or transitioning from the North).