



To Higher Ground

The Toronto Aboriginal Research Project
10-Year Legacy Review and Indigenous
Prosperity Action Plan

October 2024

**Toronto Aboriginal
Support Services Council**



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MESSAGE FROM TASSC PRESIDENT

Frances Sanderson, President, Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council

Greetings Friends,

As President of the Board and Council of TASSC, I am pleased to present the report, *To Higher Ground*. A report well known to some of you as you have thankfully assisted in its creation. For those less familiar, the Executive Summary will quickly bring you up to speed.

In brief, the report represents the results of extensive consultations with the Toronto Indigenous community, who were asked to comment on the issues that matter, the services they desire, and what folks with power and influence can do, especially to address the underlying issues confronting our communities.



We ask that you share this report with colleagues, especially those who are concerned or mandated toward assisting Indigenous people. We challenge each reader to reflect on what role they can play to support and enable the path forward as outlined in the report.

Thank you for your attention to this. Our friends and allies have always been of critical importance, and we intend to keep our relations productive and moving forward. We hope *To Higher Ground* will spark new solutions and actions and a new level of collaboration.

In Gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Frances Sanderson', written over a horizontal line.

Frances Sanderson
TASSC President

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This report concerns the views and aspirations of our community, Toronto, situated on the north shore of Lake Ontario and home to a rich and diverse Indigenous community. We acknowledge the treaty holder, the Mississaugas of the Credit, and recognize that many have walked and shared this land over millennia. May they all be honoured through our work today.

The TARP 10-Year Legacy Review and Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan is driven by the voices of the Indigenous community. Community consultations, facilitated with Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC) member agencies, brought people together for focused conversations on Indigenous services and to redefine what community prosperity would look like. To complement this work, an online survey was created to gather input from a broader range of community voices.

Over 1,000 Indigenous community members and stakeholders were engaged in the development of this report. Those who responded to our call were predominantly Indigenous people who have affiliations with TASSC member agencies. As actual consumers of our services, their feedback is invaluable. Due to limitations of all sampling methods, we caution the reader not to assume that the community narrative captured here necessarily encompasses the entire community's perspective on all topics covered in this report. This report carries a compelling message that we in Toronto must listen to, learn from, and ultimately, act on.

We want to acknowledge the contribution of the community in making this work possible. People gave their time to come together and share. They came to talking circles, both in person and virtually, and allowed themselves to be vulnerable, sharing stories of fear and hardship, as well as stories of triumph. What most stood out was the community's overpowering feeling of pride and resilience as Indigenous people and its deeply caring spirit. For every person who shared a profound experience or told their story, there were others present who provided them with open-hearted support. We have been both humbled and inspired by the selflessness of the community, who had to focus on difficult experiences to guide us in this work.

This project was conducted during an extremely trying time for all, the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and more profoundly troubling, during the first recovery of the many graves of Indigenous children and babies on the land of former residential schools. This weighs heavily. We acknowledge their return and hope to honour the messages they bring forward, so tragically told.

Frances Sanderson, President, TASSC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The TARP 10-Year Legacy Review and Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan is a follow-up and a reflection on the impact of the Toronto Aboriginal Research Project (TARP) report published in 2011, referred to throughout this report as “TARP I.” The purpose behind the recommendations outlined in TARP I was to drive positive changes in policy, service delivery, facilities, and programming, ultimately aiming to enhance the overall quality of life for Indigenous people (First Nation, Inuit, and Métis) residing in Toronto. This current report explores the community’s perception of progress achieved over the past decade and aims to serve as a catalyst for implementing deliberate and significant advancements. It does so by providing an action plan for advancing Indigenous prosperity and supports efforts for positive change. The Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan empowers the Indigenous community in Toronto to collectively envision and shape its future. Through its execution, the community will work together to walk towards this shared vision.

This inquiry has been undertaken with a sense of urgency. It is imperative to confront the systemic and institutionalized factors perpetuating poverty within the Indigenous community. This requires solutions that extend beyond simple relief measures; their pervasive and detrimental impacts must be fully recognized to create lasting change. The community’s seemingly intransigent poverty, poverty as a multigenerational and systemic reality, and the barriers and lack of opportunity this imposes on people, needs to be properly reckoned with. This report seeks to align with the perspectives of the community and its allies, not only in identifying the problems but also in committing to actions that effectively address at least some of the longstanding issues that have suppressed the Indigenous community for far too long.

There is a direct link between displacement, the loss of land, culture, and identity, and the modern-day disparities experienced by Indigenous people. Colonial history and its contemporary legacy continue to cause harm. When you examine the chances of living a prosperous life from an Indigenous lens, pervasive and systemic dynamics that hinder Indigenous people in Canada from achieving economic security are revealed. Many urban Indigenous people struggle just to maintain a stable economic footing, let alone move forward.

In the decade since TARP I, the urban Indigenous service system in the Toronto area has grown substantially, with enhanced funding, programs, and infrastructure development. New Indigenous agencies have formed, and others have expanded. The Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC) has grown from 11 agency members to 18 member organizations. At the same time, the Indigenous population has grown by 25%, with a large youth population.¹ Indigenous infrastructure has made a significant impact, one that contributes greatly to an Indigenous cultural understanding of prosperity.

Some progress has been made with government. The City of Toronto has the Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Committee and has established the long-awaited Indigenous Affairs Office. The Province of Ontario increasingly recognizes the Toronto community as unique and has assisted in strengthening its collaboration through TASSC and through enhanced supports for agencies. The federal government, through departments such as Indigenous Services Canada, Aboriginal Labour Force Development Circle (ALFDC), Miziwe Biik Development Corporation, along with other initiatives, has made substantial investments in areas where support was previously minimal or completely absent.

The degree to which the Toronto Indigenous community has advanced is evidenced by the assumption of control and greater self-determination over the institutions impacting Indigenous lives. Toronto’s legal, child-welfare, health, education, and housing services are some of the most extensive in the country, with the city leading the way in program development and delivery. The progress is significant; however, it is noteworthy that this leadership primarily concentrates on addressing immediate issues, with limited proactive planning and attention

dedicated to long-term prosperity. Indeed, the Toronto system is still coping with poverty alleviation rather than long-term solutions that seek to eradicate the challenges entirely. Although the impact of financial health on overall health and wellness is well-documented, financial wellness is not generally the focus of policy discussions or priorities.

While comments about the progress of services under community control were positive, a clear message was also received that much work needs to be done to disentangle Indigenous services from outdated and ineffective models of service. This would require the creation of a community planning process and for immediate issues to be attended to.

This report examines both the Indigenous service system and the actions to promote prosperity.

COMMUNITY SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

With regards to the Indigenous service system, it is recommended to establish a plan of action that fosters ongoing dialogue about how to optimally shape and deliver critical services to meet the needs of community. To do this, it is proposed that special forums be organized to include leadership, service users, providers, funders, and all who have a stake in the health and welfare of the community. These initial discussions should be based on the direction provided by the community itself and are elaborated on in this report in the Community Service Improvement Plan section.

Four special forums are recommended based on the most prevalent issues raised by the community:

- Service quality and accessibility
- Housing services
- Child and family services, especially child protection
- Financial health and prosperity

While simple conversations in themselves will not alter the service landscape, these conversations can be the catalyst to an honest dialogue and the acknowledgment of a willingness to work together.

These forums should establish TASSC priorities and guide its future endeavours. Agencies will need to cultivate a working culture characterized by accommodation, collaboration, and unity. TASSC needs to find long-term resources to do its job in supporting its members to meet their mandate to create an Indigenous infrastructure and service sector that will make the community proud.

INDIGENOUS PROSPERITY

As for prosperity, this means different things to different people. The Western concept of prosperity is a state of success, especially financial or material success. It means “rising to the top” (no matter how you get there) and is not often defined beyond the simple notion of personal accumulation of resources, especially material resources. Indigenous concepts of prosperity are holistic and encompass physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects and extend to family, community, and the environment, through to future generations, rather than just the individual in the present.

This project draws upon the concepts of prosperity as seen through Indigenous eyes. Different Indigenous cultures offer many understandings and related teachings. This report draws specifically on Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee traditions and honours these throughout. By understanding Indigenous perspectives on prosperity, we learn that the concept is not just about the attainment of goods, it is also about quality of life.

Prosperity aspires to *Mino bimaadiziwin* (the good life) and is guided by the values of *Ganohonyohk* (giving thanks), the collective and the interconnectedness of life.

This work has aspired to be community-driven and to gather a diverse collective of community voices. Community engagement was organized through a series of discussions and an open survey over the course of six months. Efforts were made to reach people from a broad range of Toronto’s urban Indigenous communities. Over 1,000 Indigenous community members and stakeholders participated in a community discussion, survey, interview, and/or report committee.

In addition to substantive community consultation, this report draws upon several studies that document the conditions of Indigenous people and point to actions that could result in systemic change. One such study, *The Shared Path: First Nations Financial Wellness*² report, describes four key elements of a path to financial wellness for the Indigenous community:

- Strong legal and political assets
- Enabling legislative, regulatory, and governance frameworks
- Strong institutional assets
- Cultural revitalization

TASSC leaders offered multiple ideas that would assist the community to move from surviving to thriving. The most significant point was that TASSC agencies, as the primary community representatives, must assume responsibility for the financial well-being of their members. This means taking a strong and public stance on poverty, becoming more vocal in ensuring that the Indigenous voice is heard, and engaging in initiatives that improve the prosperity of the Indigenous population.

TORONTO INDIGENOUS PROSPERITY ACTION PLAN

Based on the findings from the community consultations, this report proposes a series of actions by the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan, to be undertaken in three phases:

- Short-term opportunities included:
 - Establishing the commitments and resources needed to implement the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan,
 - Establishing program(s) to ensure that all Indigenous people access the financial benefits to which they are entitled, and
 - Seizing emerging housing opportunities.
- Medium-term opportunities included:
 - Reinforcing “housing first” as a prerequisite for all other interventions,
 - Supporting the creation of housing options that are stable, sustainable, accessible, and affordable, including ownership, and
 - Creating the wrap-around services that are needed for Indigenous supportive-housing residents.
- Longer-term opportunities included:
 - Developing Indigenous-led institutional capacity to promote and strengthen financial wellness and prosperity within the Toronto Indigenous community, and
 - Developing the Indigenous service system.

To ensure successful implementation, a project management structure with governance and accountability mechanisms is proposed for the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan. The following is advised for consideration by TASSC and the allies who were assembled during the project.

- Implementation Steering Committee, including:
 - Membership to include members of TASSC and all three sectors of the Ally Table: government (federal, provincial, municipal), philanthropic, and private sector, and
 - Terms of reference that include planning and approval of guiding principles, the collective commitment to the annual implementation plans, and reporting mechanisms.
- A declaration of collective commitment, including:
 - A formal commitment from each organization to implement the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan,
 - A commitment to membership on the Implementation Steering Committee, and
 - A commitment to the guiding principles for implementation.
- Project management resources, including:
 - TASSC to serve as project manager, and
 - Adequate personnel and financial resources to implement, coordinate, and monitor progress, as well as manage accountability mechanisms associated with the annual work plans.
- Annual work plans, including:
 - Developing community initiatives creating roles and responsibilities, implementing timelines and reporting processes, and ensuring the creation and execution of evaluation plans.

Progress will require continued partnering with allies in government, business, and the philanthropic sector to generate actions that are dignified and long-lasting, strength-based solutions. Calls to Action for each sector are identified in order to drive this work forward.

Actions for All Levels of Government:

- Create an integrated action plan from all levels that delineates responsibilities, authorities, and actions to achieve Indigenous prosperity.
- Reinforce “housing first” as a prerequisite to all other interventions.
- Support the creation of housing options that are stable, sustainable, accessible, and affordable.
- Create Indigenous programs, policies, and processes that are co-developed and strength-based to support and nurture urban communities generally and Toronto’s specifically.
- The federal government must complete a renewed Urban Indigenous Strategy and dedicate funding for Indigenous urban housing and social programming, with priority emphasis on cities with large urban Indigenous populations, using a locally determined approach with coalitions like TASSC.
- The provincial government must commit to a cross-government Indigenous strategy that addresses the income, employment, housing, and health needs of the urban Indigenous population. Additionally, it must take part in planning, discussions, and the building of effective relationships.
- The City of Toronto needs to implement its Reconciliation Action Plan.
- The City of Toronto must commit to a Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan implementation structure with TASSC.

Actions for the Private Sector:

- Develop and enhance institutional capacity to know and understand the experiences of Indigenous communities and people, and to treat those Indigenous clients respectfully at every interface.
- Support, resource, and collaborate on Indigenous housing initiatives.
- Ensure that all Indigenous Torontonians have access to information about their financial rights and entitlements.
- Focus on ensuring the appropriate financial resources are understood for those with special needs, in regard to costs required to ameliorate those needs.
- Ensure that Indigenous people access what is owed to them through legal challenges and Human Rights Tribunals.
- In collaboration with TASSC members, develop and implement anti-poverty and prosperity-related programs.
- Commit to a Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan implementation structure with TASSC.
- Fund and sponsor Indigenous community initiatives.

Actions for the Philanthropic Sector:

- Develop and enhance institutional capacity to know and understand the experience of Indigenous peoples.
- Establish prosperity as the objective in relations with the Indigenous community.
- Invest a portion of endowment funds in Indigenous social impact projects.
- Collaborate with other funders to ensure adequate support for all the necessary program components needed for effective impact.
- Commit to a Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan implementation structure with TASSC.
- Build relationships with Indigenous leaders and agencies.
- Set annual targets to increase funding allocations for Indigenous initiatives.



Chapter 1

The Last 10 Years

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The goals of the TARP 10-Year Legacy Review and Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan are twofold:

- 1) To review the impact of the Toronto Aboriginal Research Project (TARP) report published in 2011, referred to throughout this report as “TARP I”, and
- 2) To develop a community-driven Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan, with a central focus on the promotion of Indigenous prosperity, initiated by the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC).

TARP I was a report that representatives of the Indigenous community of Toronto, through the Toronto Aboriginal Social Services Association (TASSA, the forerunner of TASSC), collectively worked on in collaboration with other Indigenous organizations and with representative governments. The collaboration sought to examine a wide variety of topics, aiming to create a vivid real-time picture of life as it was experienced by the Indigenous community.

TARP I’s large data sample created confidence that the conclusions it drew were an accurate representation of life in general for this diverse and complex community. The study not only employed multiple measures to ensure both depth and breadth, but it also adopted an applied approach, generating actionable recommendations derived from the data, both vetted and supported by TASSA.

The goals of the TARP I recommendations were to lead to positive changes in the formation of policy, service delivery, facilities, and programming, thereby improving the overall quality of life for Indigenous people living in Toronto. This retrospective review of TARP I explores what progress the community perceives as having been made and what still needs to be accomplished.

The added and urgent dimension of this inquiry is the question of how the community perceives the pervasive and seemingly intransigent reality of multigenerational and systemic racism, oppression, poverty, displacement, and lack of opportunity within the community and how to effectively overcome these barriers. The burden these realities impose on people is a grave and enduring concern. A pervasive and systemic set of dynamics has denied Indigenous people in Canada economic security and the chance to live a prosperous life, with “prosperity” being defined by Indigenous peoples’ own values. Whether this has been done deliberately or accidentally, many urban Indigenous people struggle to stay in place, let alone move forward. The reality of poverty and lack of prosperity was a dominant theme throughout TARP I. In this current inquiry, resources were to be directed towards a close examination of the issue of poverty and, more importantly, what could be done about it.

In 2015, the City of Toronto produced a city-wide anti-poverty strategy that failed to include Indigenous content or considerations. This omission was the catalyst for starting a conversation that would go beyond the constant restating of an old issue—a depressing one, to be sure—and create pathways towards some resolution. This led to the current project. The need for a way forward challenged this current project to create tangible and emphatic behaviours that may not resolve the issue of income disparity but aspires to create real and transformational change.

Quite simply, we asked the community to articulate the issues from their perspectives and to advise us on what strength-based approaches could be used to benefit their financial health.

METHODOLOGY

This report aims to offer a diverse and vast audience insight into the current status of the Indigenous community in Toronto concerning the progress and development over the past 10 years. The report can be a useful tool to many stakeholders, including policy makers, agencies, and their officials who administer and deliver policies or programs and, most importantly, the beneficiaries of the programs. It is written in plain language, attempting to avoid the use of academic jargon, and therefore is designed to be useful as a source of information for the general public.

REPORT KEYWORDSⁱ

Topics

- Urban Indigenous community
- Indigenous culture
- Affordable housing
- Service quality
- Discrimination
- Justice
- Community-based research
- Indigenous service system
- Indigenous prosperity
- Homelessness
- Mental health
- Toronto Aboriginal Research Project (TARP)
- First Nation, Inuit, and Métis
- Health and wellness
- Poverty
- Racism

Locations

- Toronto
- Canada

Organizations

- TASSC

COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH

This initiative was committed to keeping with best practices and adopting a community-based approach in the engagement and knowledge gathering. There are two fundamental characteristics of a community-based approach. First, having Indigenous community representatives assume key decision-making roles in overseeing all aspects of the work. Second, the knowledge gathered is designed to be 'useful'. Useful can be interpreted as being able to address community-defined issues to inform social action design. This will allow for social problems to be addressed and for the social condition to be improved. It is important for the report to be responsive to community and stakeholders' needs and produce usable information.

As Indigenous people assume greater influence over research conducted within their communities, specific principles and ethical guidelines have been developed to ensure research respects individuals, communities, and cultural traditions and practices, while ensuring the interests of Indigenous people are served. The First Nation principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (also referred to as OCAP), have been widely adopted by researchers conducting research with Indigenous people.

The report was guided by the above principles of community-based research. The project team was overseen by TASSC and the project Steering Committee, from start to finish. In addition, a Community Table composed of individuals with lived experience played a role in project design and provided input on the analyzed results of the community engagement.

ⁱ Generated with JSTOR Labs Text Analyzer

The majority of Indigenous community knowledge gathered was through two primary methods: “live” (in person or virtual) community circles and a survey. Additional stakeholder interviews with Indigenous agency executive directors, government officials, and community allies were conducted, along with a review of relevant research and guiding reports. In total, over 1,000 Indigenous community members and stakeholders from Toronto were engaged to direct this work.

COMMUNITY CIRCLES

The community circles were held as focus groups, bringing a diverse group of people together. These circles were semi-structured, facilitated conversations addressing priorities within the initiative. The community circles were organized with the help of Indigenous host agenciesⁱⁱ that invited Indigenous individuals through their networks. The facilitator coordinated the discussion using a set of questionsⁱⁱⁱ, supported by an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper and wellness support (e.g., counsellor). The content of the discussions was recorded for later analysis. Community circle participants received an honorarium in recognition of their time contributions and knowledge sharing. The project team conducted 23 focus groups involving 410 participants from July to December 2022. The majority of the community circle participants (97%) also completed the survey.

Table 1: Number of Community Members who Participated in Community Circles

#	Community Circle Host	Format	Date (2022)	Number of Participants
1	Toronto & York Region Métis Council	Virtual	July 29 th	31
2	Nishnawbe Homes (109 Park Rd S)	In Person	Aug 3 rd	8
3	Nishnawbe Homes (244 Church St)	In Person	Aug 7 th	11
4	Nishnawbe Homes (425 Dundas St E)	In Person	Aug 7 th	7
5	Miziwe Biik	Virtual	Aug 10 th	27
6	2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations	Virtual	Aug 11 th	29
7	Aboriginal Legal Services	In Person	Aug 13 th	13
8	Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy	In Person	Aug 23 rd	8
9	Native Women’s Resource Centre of Toronto	Virtual	Aug 26 th	11
10	Na Me Res (Native Men’s Residence)	In Person	Sept 8 th	29
11	Native Child and Family Services of Toronto	Virtual	Sept 14 th	18
12	Cross Agency Staff Session	Virtual	Sept 17 th	9
13	Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy	In Person	Sept 20 th	7
14	Cross Agency Staff Session	Virtual	Sept 21 st	10
15	Wigwamen Incorporated	Virtual	Sept 28 th	6
16	Toronto Inuit Association	Virtual	Oct 5 th	22
17	Toronto & York Region Métis Council	Virtual	Oct 6 th	20

ⁱⁱ See Table 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ The community circle facilitator questions are provided in the Appendix.

#	Community Circle Host	Format	Date (2022)	Number of Participants
18	Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes	In Person	Oct 7 th	60
19	Miziwe Biik	Virtual	Oct 8 th	16
20	Native Canadian Centre of Toronto	Virtual	Nov 8 th	27
21	TASSC	Virtual	Nov 10 th	14
22	Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society	In Person	Nov 30 th	6
23	Urban Indigenous Education Centre	Virtual	Dec 13 th	21
Total Live Session Participants				410

COMMUNITY SURVEY

To gather and understand the views and experiences of a large number of Indigenous people in Toronto, a community survey was developed in the form of a self-administrated questionnaire. The survey was accessible both online and in print, and all survey participants received an honorarium in recognition of their time and knowledge sharing. Indigenous agencies across the districts of Toronto acted as key touch points to help distribute the survey to the community. In total, 898 surveys were completed by Indigenous individuals who live in Toronto and the surrounding area.

Table 2: Number of Completed Community Member Surveys via Agency Outreach

Agency Leading Outreach	Completed Surveys
2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations	37
Aboriginal Legal Services	30
ENAGB	121
Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes	60
Miziwe Biik	44
Na Me Res (Native Men's Residence)	49
Native Canadian Centre of Toronto	27
Native Child and Family Services of Toronto	66
Native Women's Resource Centre of Toronto	30
Nishnawbe Homes	33
Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy	73
TASSC	86
Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society	6
Toronto and York Region Métis Council	57
Toronto Inuit Association	22
Urban Indigenous Education Centre	21
Wigwamen Incorporated	136
Total Completed Surveys	898

THE URBAN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY IN TORONTO

Toronto has the largest urban Indigenous population in Ontario and the fourth-largest urban Indigenous population in Canada.³ Many challenges exist in getting complete and accurate information on the number of Indigenous people in Toronto and their circumstances. According to the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC), 86% of Indigenous people in Ontario live off-reserve. The 2016 data used for *Our Health Counts*⁴ (a research project that conducted the largest urban Indigenous population health study in Canada, for which Indigenous organizations owned and controlled the data) estimated that there were 75,000 Indigenous people in Toronto; however, the 2016 Census counted the Indigenous population at 46,320 (that is a 47% difference). The census often relies on a fixed address and many Indigenous people move frequently and experience a much greater incidence of homelessness. There is also a reluctance among Indigenous people to fill out the census. According to Canada's 2016 Census Metropolitan Area statistics, the Indigenous population in the Toronto region increased from 37,000 in 2011 to 46,320 in 2016, or by 25%. This large increase may reflect other research that has shown that the national census undercounts Indigenous peoples.

Our Health Counts' 2016 data also tells us that 90% of Indigenous families studied live below the poverty line. This striking statistic tells us that Indigenous people are facing considerable barriers to prosperity and are enduring significant socioeconomic stress in comparison to other Torontonians. Both objective and qualitative data show that action is clearly needed for Indigenous people in Toronto to prosper.

WHAT THE DATA SAYS ABOUT THE INDIGENOUS POPULATION IN TORONTO

Notwithstanding the underreporting and data complexities described above, there have been community studies, such as *Our Health Counts*, that illustrate the experiences of many. These findings, in addition to what we heard in our inquiry, provide important data to inform the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan. Later in this report, we describe the assets that have been built in the Indigenous community since TARP I.

The following briefly summarizes challenges facing the Indigenous community:

- **Well-Being** – *Our Health Counts* found that three out of five Indigenous adults (61%) in Toronto said their overall health/well-being had been impacted by financial hardship in the past 12 months (circa 2016). Over half of Indigenous adults in Toronto believed that their ability to engage in preventative health activities had been affected by financial hardship.
- **Chronic Health Conditions** – 65% of Indigenous adults in Toronto reported having one or more chronic health conditions,⁵ with 38% of Indigenous adults (20+ years) in Toronto experiencing multimorbidity (two or more chronic health conditions), compared to 15% of the general adult population in Canada.⁶ Fifteen percent of Indigenous adults in Toronto were diagnosed with diabetes by their healthcare provider, nearly twice the rate (8%) of the general adult population in the city.⁷
- **Education** – *Our Health Counts* found that there was an increased level of education among the younger generation (25–44 years) compared to the older generation (45+ years). Indigenous adults in Toronto between the ages of 25–64 years had a lower rate of high school completion (57%) compared to the general Ontario population (88%).⁸ Among Indigenous adults who did complete high school, there was a high rate of completion of at least some college or university (65%).

- **Employment** – 63% of Indigenous adults in Toronto were unemployed compared to 7% of adults (15+ years) in Ontario.⁹ Of those employed, the median total income for the urban Indigenous community was 13.4% less than the general population (\$27,440 versus \$31,712).¹⁰
- **Income** – 87% of Indigenous adults in Toronto fell below the before-tax low-income cut-off (LICO),¹¹ whereas only 15.6% of the general population is deemed low-income.¹² Leading sources of income for Indigenous adults were:
 - Disability
 - Provincial/Municipal social assistance or welfare
 - Wages and salaries from employment.
- **Food Security** – Nearly 28% of Indigenous households are food-insecure, a rate almost three times higher than the rate of households nationally (11%).¹³
- **Housing** – *Our Health Counts* found that more than a third (35%) of Indigenous adults in Toronto were precariously housed or experiencing homelessness at the time of their survey, more than eight times higher than the national rate (4%) for Canadian adults.¹⁴ Forty-four percent of stably housed Indigenous adults in Toronto reported living in social housing,¹⁵ compared to only 4% who owned their dwelling (13 times lower than the Toronto homeownership rate of 53%).¹⁶
- **Homelessness** – An estimated 7,800 people experience homelessness in Toronto every night. While population estimates place Indigenous people somewhere between 1.6% and 2.4% of Toronto’s overall population, approximately 20% of people experiencing homelessness identify as Indigenous. Based on the 2021 Street Needs Assessment (SNA),¹⁷ Indigenous people represent 15% of those experiencing homelessness and an even greater share of people experiencing outdoor homelessness (i.e., abstaining from shelter use).

While the precise statistics vary, the objective data and qualitative input reflect an Indigenous population that might be described in three groups:

- **Distressed** – those who are homeless, precariously housed and/or not receiving social benefits to which they are entitled,
- **Stressed** – those who are living paycheck to paycheck without assets that would provide a financial safety net or some potential to build capital over time, and
- **Managing** – those who have stable jobs and housing and, in most cases, education and some assets to provide a financial safety net and ability to build capital over time.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF TARP

In 2009, the TASSA commissioned TARP I, the largest and most comprehensive study ever conducted of Indigenous peoples in Toronto. Established in the mid-1990s, TASSA, then an informal group of Indigenous executives, met to collectively examine the issues and to share information across their organizations. In May 2011, TASSA incorporated and became the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC), a name more suited to the growing services its member organizations provide. Today, TASSC is made up of 18 member and associate member organizations in Toronto.^{iv}

^{iv} TASSC member agencies are listed in the Appendix.

While TARP I was not the first inquiry focused on the Toronto Indigenous community, formal or publicly generated research on Indigenous urbanization did not emerge until the promotion of federal assimilation-oriented policies in the 1970s. This caused conflict and turned media attention to an otherwise dormant discourse on Indigenous relations. Academics showed up and largely published documents that simply tried to gain a basic understanding of Indigenous peoples in Canada, including the Toronto community. Early research and reports are not readily available, they made little attempt to influence policy or the programs impacting the Indigenous community, nor do they provide much insight, due to their simple descriptive nature. Urban infrastructure and related governance—indeed, urban institutions controlled by the Indigenous community—were still more a dream than a reality.

The publication of the *Ontario Task Force on Native People in the Urban Settings* (1981) started the discourse and understanding that Indigenous people were progressively urbanizing, indeed had been doing so since the Second World War and would continue to do so at an ever-accelerating pace. It shocked many to learn that Toronto had the Indigenous population of a good-sized town. The study changed the research lens, which now focused on unmet needs and on creating an understanding of how to address them. Advocacy based on the documentation of the dynamics of social injustice and the inequities of Indigenous life in Toronto was a large part of the task-force mission. This approach later became more common with reports increasingly raising issues that remain unresolved to this day.

Poverty and lack of prosperity, especially their impact on housing and food security, are now consistently recognized as a structural problem that severely impacts the health and welfare of the Toronto Indigenous community. TARP I rolled up and annotated the research that had been undertaken up to 2011.

Since the publication of TARP I, there has been much written, but most reports have been specific to a particular issue as seen through the lens of the non-Indigenous sector, including:

- *Aboriginal Employment Strategy* (City of Toronto, 2014)
- *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (TRC Commission of Canada, 2015)
- *Indigenous Health Strategy* (City of Toronto, 2016)
- *Meeting in the Middle: Engagement Strategy and Action Plan* (City of Toronto and TASSC, 2018)
- *Ontario Urban Indigenous Action Plan* (Ontario Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation [MIRR], OFIFC, MNO and the Ontario Native Women's Association [ONWA], 2018)
- *Indigenous Overdose Strategy* (City of Toronto, 2019)
- *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019)
- *Aboriginal Education Strategy* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021)

Of these reports, *Meeting in the Middle* is considered as having yielded the greatest impact in Toronto as it directed action on housing, one of the most pressing issues confronting the community. In addition, the *Our Health Counts* report was an extensive community-based inquiry that documented health and related wellness indicators and found some alarming conditions prevailing among Indigenous people in the city.

A more recent study, *Ganohonyohk: Giving Thanks* (2019) by the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC), focused on poverty and its impact within the multiple and diverse urban Indigenous communities across the province. The study is notable in defining what a prosperous life can look like to Indigenous people. Most recently, *The Shared Path*, a study published by the Aboriginal Financial Officers Association (AFOA) and Prosper Canada,¹⁸ speaks of poverty as a complex issue to be addressed in multiple ways. The report has a practical nature, addressing structural issues generally missing from or merely referenced in more academic

reports. What is recommended in *The Shared Path* has remarkable utility, especially in conjunction with *Ganohonyohk: Giving Thanks*. These two reports and their very respectable treatment of the issues have grounded our work through the knowledge we have gained.

TARP TEN YEARS LATER: A RETROSPECTIVE AND A REFLECTIVE REVIEW OF ITS LEGACY

Initiated by the Toronto Indigenous community as represented by TASSA, TARP I sought to gain a better understanding of the circumstances of Indigenous people in Toronto. Its purpose was to better understand the diverse and geographically scattered urbanized Indigenous community from its own perspective and to recommend how to better meet their needs. The principle of “community voice” underscored the approach, and there was a need to make its findings of tangible benefit to Indigenous people themselves.

In 2011, TASSA was comprised of 11 Indigenous agencies, with mandates spanning multiple service provisions related to meeting the specific needs of community members, particularly the most vulnerable. TARP I outlines areas of inquiry that were important to TASSA member agencies and included Indigenous stakeholders as the primary source of information. These areas of inquiry encompassed life-cycle categories, 2-Spirited people, economic states, and culture, and focused attention on critical issues, including homelessness, the justice system, and Indigenous urban governance.

The principles of community-based participatory research were followed. TARP I and its recommendations were presented as the voice of the Toronto Indigenous community. The survey gathered information from over 1,400 community members, and this data was categorized by themes related to areas of the study. Fifty-eight specific recommendations were presented—recommendations that encouraged actions to improve the lives of community members in real and tangible ways. The broad focus of the report ensured the inclusion of the wide-ranging and diverse Indigenous community and could thus serve as a reference point for multiple stakeholders.

TARP I also served to chronicle the history, mandates, and service programs of the sponsoring agencies. TARP I further profiled selected Indigenous leaders and community members in a supporting document, the *Life History Report*, which added substance and context to the statistical profile. This was “storytelling” as told by those at the forefront of the changes to come and did much to give an all-important “face” to the report.

The result was a comprehensive document that recorded the Indigenous community’s state of being from the community’s own perspective and continues to be the record of the community voice of the day. TARP I served to provide direction to service providers, policy-makers, politicians, and advocates in their efforts to be responsive to their Indigenous constituents. It was not simply a report with recommendations for a select few; it was a call to action for those who have responsibilities and mandates toward the health and welfare of Indigenous Torontonians.

It was hoped that the document would serve not only to direct action but would also assist in defining the unique status and context of Indigenous people in the city. Even with all its diversity, Toronto has been slow to appreciate the unique and potentially growth-producing nature of a new and refined relationship with its Indigenous population. TARP I was seen as an opportunity for everyone to take stock, and it was hoped that it could act as a roadmap to show the way forward toward a good future for the community, especially for those who were most vulnerable.

WHAT HAPPENED

Out of the 58 recommendations in TARP I, fewer than half are considered to have been fully implemented in accordance with the true interpretation and literal intent of the recommendations. It is important to clarify, at the outset, that this does not mean that the implementation rate was low, or that little happened—much actually did

happen. As we looked back over the decade, we appreciated that to get a true picture of the legacy of TARP I, questions needed to be developed that went beyond simple “yes” and “no” responses. We needed to create a perspective that allowed for the positive message that Toronto has been and continues to be moving forward.

It was always fundamentally important for us to remember that the recommendations were crafted through community engagement. As such, they were immediate responses to the urgent needs of the community at that time. A decade later, things have changed. Those needs and how best to meet them needed to be revisited through a modern and holistic lens. By looking back, we have come to appreciate that to properly assess the impact of TARP I we had to revisit the themes that formed the foundation of the recommendations and base our review on those. Thus, this retrospective review took a less literal and more general view of TARP I and raised questions that honoured both TARP I and today’s perspective.

Before outlining the work undertaken by this review, there are a few things to note. In the decade since TARP I, the Indigenous service system has grown substantially, with increased funding, programs, and infrastructure development. New Indigenous agencies have formed, and others have expanded in scope and have ventured into the suburbs. Since 2011, TASSC has had considerable growth, expanding from 11 member agencies to 18.

The City of Toronto has directed its growth toward supporting the Indigenous community by establishing the Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Committee, opening the long-awaited Indigenous Affairs Office, and has released its own Reconciliation Action Plan. The Province of Ontario is increasingly recognizing the Toronto community as unique and has assisted in strengthening collaboration through TASSC and through enhanced supports to agencies. The federal government, through Indigenous Services Canada, Aboriginal Labour Force Development Circle (ALFDC), Miziwe Biik Development Corporation, and other initiatives, has made substantial investments as well.

TASSC has grown tremendously over the last ten years in its effort to act as a unified voice on issues related to its support-services mandate. TASSC is a viable coalition within the Toronto Indigenous community and continues to demonstrate strength in service planning, policy development, and advocacy.

At its highest level of impact, TARP I put the Toronto Indigenous community on the map. Going into this review we’ve heard that TARP I symbolizes the community standing up, seeking recognition as unique, and refusing to be seen solely under the diversity banner. It moved the conversation on Indigenous relations from “equity-seeking,” an inappropriate descriptor, to “self-determination,” one embraced by the community. During that time, it was likely that anyone who had a stake in the Indigenous community not only knew of TARP I but also possessed a copy of the report.

This accomplishment cannot be overstated. TARP I may have achieved the ideal scenario, because regardless of whether all its recommendations were implemented, the research process itself advanced the community by providing purpose, a voice, and an opportunity to collectively stand up and be counted. It exemplified community development in action.

While TARP I cannot be solely credited for all the above progress, our current study aimed to determine the extent of its influence on this progress. We also needed to assess what TARP I did not achieve, not just in terms of its recommendations, but also in the promotion of a quality service sector, especially in the areas of collaboration, social planning, and advocacy. TARP I was widely circulated and both Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders referenced it in their efforts to improve service to Indigenous Torontonians. It fostered cohesion and a shared purpose within a diverse community that had little experience in past collaboration.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE: CHANCES AND OBSTACLES

Systemic change is often referenced as necessary for improving the conditions of the oppressed and marginalized, but the specific steps to achieving this change can be elusive. This is especially true for

Indigenous communities who live in a complex reality navigating two conflicting and irreconcilable systems: mainstream Canada and their Indigenous affiliation and identity. Without clarity on required actions for change, both systems can find themselves at a standstill and often default to simple land acknowledgments and rhetorical references to decolonization and other poorly defined concepts.

Notwithstanding the above, *The Shared Path* suggests that there exist certain conditions that when present can facilitate personal and collective prosperity and conversely, when absent, act to undermine it.

It is important to note that *The Shared Path* was developed primarily within the context of financial wellness for First Nation peoples and communities. Though its application to Métis or Inuit communities is less clear, it was deemed relevant to all Indigenous people within the scope of this inquiry while still recognizing that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis are distinct Indigenous Peoples with unique political, legal, and economic histories, challenges, and current realities.

While the Indigenous community of Toronto encompasses diverse identities and contextual considerations, it is bound together through common experience and the existence of historical and structural issues impacting its residents. Toronto's Indigenous community is, in fact, a mosaic of Indigenous people who connect to other rights-holding Indigenous governments and Nations, primarily located elsewhere in the province or country.

The following is a review of how well Toronto understands the conditions necessary for systemic change leading to prosperity.

A) STRONG LEGAL AND POLITICAL ASSETS

The Indigenous community of Toronto is dramatically different from any individual First Nation. It is multicultural, encompassing multiple identities and affiliations. While it has leadership, that leadership is not based on a legislative mandate and is expressed through diverse formal and informal relationships.

Toronto is recognized in Treaty 13 (Mississaugas of the Credit). However, this appears to have no practical influence on the community's life. A land acknowledgment is a public expression of recognition of that Treaty, but beyond this, there is little that is tangible to demonstrate the assertion of rights under this Treaty or its practical application. Similarly, the existence of an Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Committee within the city's governance framework does not demonstrate an assertion of rights under the Treaty. The Committee has struggled to achieve movement in areas to address the substantive structural issues brought forward in this report. While it is a committee of the City Council, it appears to have no relationship with City Council and its reports (if any) to Council are confined to practical and immediate considerations.

The most direct Indigenous governance process exists within the many elected directors on boards and committees of the non-profits, primarily service-related Indigenous organizations. TASSC is a coalition of these bodies and represents a practical governance approach, but it has no authority beyond the mandates of its individual member organizations. It is noteworthy that the active leadership at the civic level is predominantly from the non-profit sector, which is typically mandated to deal with issues and expressions of personal problems. This is a strong indicator of the pervasive legacy of colonial practices of oppression and exclusion. Mental health issues, child welfare, homelessness, and other consequences of trauma are often accompanied by pervasive financial distress that dominates the service landscape. Addictions and intimate-partner violence are of grave concern in the community and many agencies provide both preventive and ameliorative programming. Many also provide cultural and social programming services, which are highly valued and well-reviewed by the community.

B) ENABLING LEGISLATIVE, REGULATORY, AND GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS

The Toronto Indigenous community, as in all urban centres in Canada, has no specific legislative, regulatory, or governance frameworks. The boards of directors of the organizations that serve the community in various functions are democratic and charitable, and it is through those bodies that a semblance of accountability exists. They act as an elected proxy for a murky and ill-defined political system governing urban Indigenous people in Toronto and, indeed, across the country.

First Nations members (Status) living in Toronto are considered to be within the jurisdiction of their respective nations, but there are no mechanisms to express those jurisdictions in tangible ways. Exceptions include child welfare legislation that requires extensive engagement with a First Nation whenever a First Nation child comes to the attention of a children's aid society. It is expected that the passing of federal legislation increasing child and family service authority for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis will change how services are delivered in urban areas, but at this point it is not possible to determine how this will be achieved.

The Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) serves as the democratically elected Métis government for rights-holding Métis citizens in Ontario. While the MNO was not created to represent all individuals and communities that claim to be Métis, it does represent those individuals and communities that are a part of the Métis Nation or rights-holding Métis communities in Ontario.¹⁹ In 2019, the MNO and Canada signed a historic self-government agreement that recognized that the Métis communities represented by the MNO hold the inherent right to self-government.²⁰ As with other Indigenous peoples who collectively hold constitutionally recognized Section 35 self-government and self-determination rights, the MNO's self-government agreement includes a provision for legislative recognition by Canada of the agreement and of the MNO as a Métis government with law-making powers in a number of core areas. In the Greater Toronto Area, MNO citizens are represented at the local level through the Toronto & York Region Métis Council.

The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami is present in Toronto. While Inuit have been part of the Toronto Indigenous community for decades, the population is thought to be small, scattered, and are generally not as well known to the rest of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Toronto.

As the Toronto community grows and develops at a steady pace, as in other urban centres across Canada, legislative and policy development have simply not kept up. Today, Toronto is on its own in developing local models of governance tailored to its unique reality. In Toronto TASSC plays a huge role by default, acting as the representative of its diverse Indigenous community. More work will need to be done.

There is little to report regarding any significant investment in the financial health of the Toronto Indigenous community. Most funds flow directly to the community in the form of grants from diverse and multiple funding sources, mostly government, with a focus on addressing the consequences of poverty rather than poverty itself. For example, child welfare, supportive housing, legal services, and health services receive far more extensive funding compared to structural interventions. It's easier and cheaper to get counselling for addictions than it is to find help for addressing the underlying structural causes of these issues.

Exceptions do exist. The work of Miziwe Biik, through the establishment of the Miziwe Biik Development Corporation, is building the foundation for a more prosperous community. This is the most established and focused Indigenous-led response to the structures underlying poverty. With its focus on job training and employment, Miziwe Biik addresses the need for increased education, credentials, certifications, and other requisites for Indigenous people to find and hold quality jobs in Toronto's highly competitive job market. Their extensive training programs, primarily in trades, often in partnership with mainstream unions and colleges, include job boards, internships, and other collaborative initiatives, with a strong emphasis on providing personal supports.

Of significance, Miziwe Biik Development Corporation has also invested substantially to support Indigenous Torontonians buying their own homes, providing rent supplements as well as other efforts to make stable housing a reality for participants. Miziwe Biik should be recognized for its efforts to make a difference in the economic advancement of Indigenous Torontonians. However, in the face of the long-standing issues impacting the financial health of the community, making a structural difference will be challenging for them. Several realities serve to impede progress, including racism within the rental market and the staggering costs in Toronto of even modest home ownership.

C) STRONG INSTITUTIONAL ASSETS

It is worth looking for a moment at the mainstream financial resources that play a role in the economic life of Indigenous Torontonians. While Torontonians have various options to achieve prosperity, there's a lack of specific, or even general, approaches to assist Indigenous people in their search for economic stability and prosperity.

As questionable as they are, cash-advance and payday-lender businesses often serve as the sole financial support for many Indigenous Torontonians. Banks and other related financial institutions are often quick to advertise inclusion within their public face, but their programs and services are either inexperienced in actualizing inclusivity or they are not up to the challenge.

As for general assets that exist to foster economic stability and development, the Toronto community is highly developed in two specific areas that have tremendous importance in establishing the conditions for prosperity.

One is a land base on which an economic infrastructure can be built and, more importantly, which can act as a demonstration of the capacity of the community to solve its own problems. Indigenous-controlled agencies in Toronto tend to own the land and the buildings in which they operate, often mortgage-free. Perhaps because of the experience of land loss, Toronto non-profits have collectively undertaken huge efforts to ensure they have control over this critical aspect of community prosperity. It's difficult to estimate the extent or the value of lands owned collectively by Indigenous Toronto, but it's reasonable to assume it is well over what might be expected from a community plagued by disproportionate levels of poverty.

The second asset is the degree to which the Toronto Indigenous community has assumed control over the institutions impacting their lives, including legal, child welfare, health, education, and housing services. These services are among the most extensive in the country, with Toronto leading the way in program development and delivery. However, these institutions often focus on addressing problems rather than fostering growth and prosperity. Indeed, the Toronto system is still coping with poverty alleviation and pays minimal attention to long-term solutions despite the well-documented impact of financial wellness on overall health.

D) CULTURAL REVITALIZATION

The Toronto community is diverse, with varied identities and affiliations, but most Indigenous Torontonians will agree that Indigenous culture is to be valued in its own right, and it needs to be the core of any service development and program delivery impacting community life. The community clearly expressed this need throughout this study. Most Indigenous-led organizations in the city have cultural programs as part of their services, with ceremony being not only promoted but provided to those who seek it out, and many people do.

However, just as people value culture in the city, the forces of assimilation can rule the day-to-day. With the community constantly changing and the reality that one must "fit in" to be successful, Indigenous cultures and ways of knowing cannot be taken for granted. Community leaders see cultural support as vital to long-term community survival.



Chapter 2

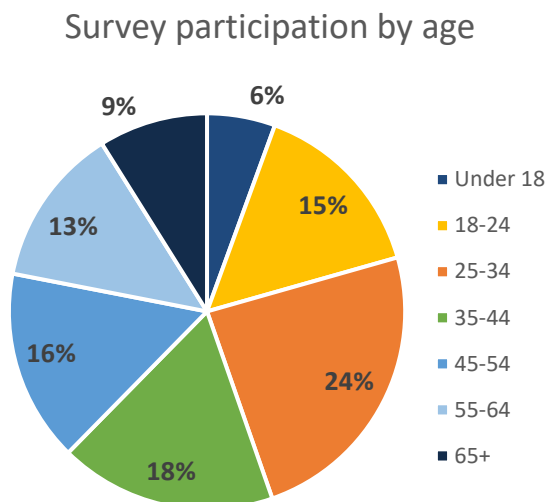
The Community Voice

WHO IN THE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATED

We want to acknowledge and express deep gratitude to the community members for their invaluable contributions through their participation. Your passion was inspiring. You came together and shared in ways that allowed yourselves to be vulnerable, recounting stories of injustice, fear, and hardship, as well as stories of triumph. What most stood out was the community's overpowering feeling of pride and resilience as Indigenous people and its deeply caring spirit. For every person who shared a profound experience or told their truth, there were others who stood with them providing a safe doorway and open-hearted support. The selflessness of the community in focusing on difficult experiences, founded in colonial trauma, to assist our work, was humbling and we are truly honoured.

This project was conducted during an extremely trying time for all, the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and more profoundly troubling, during the first recovery of the many graves of Indigenous children and babies on the land of former residential schools. This weighs heavily. We acknowledge their return and hope to honour the messages so tragically told.

Over 1,000 Indigenous community members and stakeholders were engaged in the development of the report. Those who responded to our call were predominantly Indigenous people who have affiliations with TASSC member agencies. As actual consumers of our services, their feedback is invaluable. Due to limitations of all sampling methods, we caution the reader not to assume that the community narrative captured here necessarily encompasses the entire community's perspective on all topics covered in this report. This report carries a compelling message that we in Toronto must listen to, learn from and, ultimately, act on.



Four hundred and ten individuals participated in one of 23 facilitated community circles, either in person or virtually, focusing on top priorities such as cultural reclamation and basic living needs. Expanding culture and arts in the community was a common interest, but many community participants emphasized that addressing basic needs is their primary focus. The urban Indigenous population continues to feel negatively stereotyped by the general public and experiences open discrimination. As the community continues to deal with systemic and entrenched inequities, they feel left alone to deal with the realities of often poor service quality and unmet commitments from civic society, especially governments.

The survey collected responses from 898 individuals who identified as First Nation, Inuit, and/or Métis. People of all ages participated;^v over half (58%) were between 25 and 54 years of age. More women (63%) than men (27%) completed the survey, and 4% identified as 2-Spirited.^{vi}

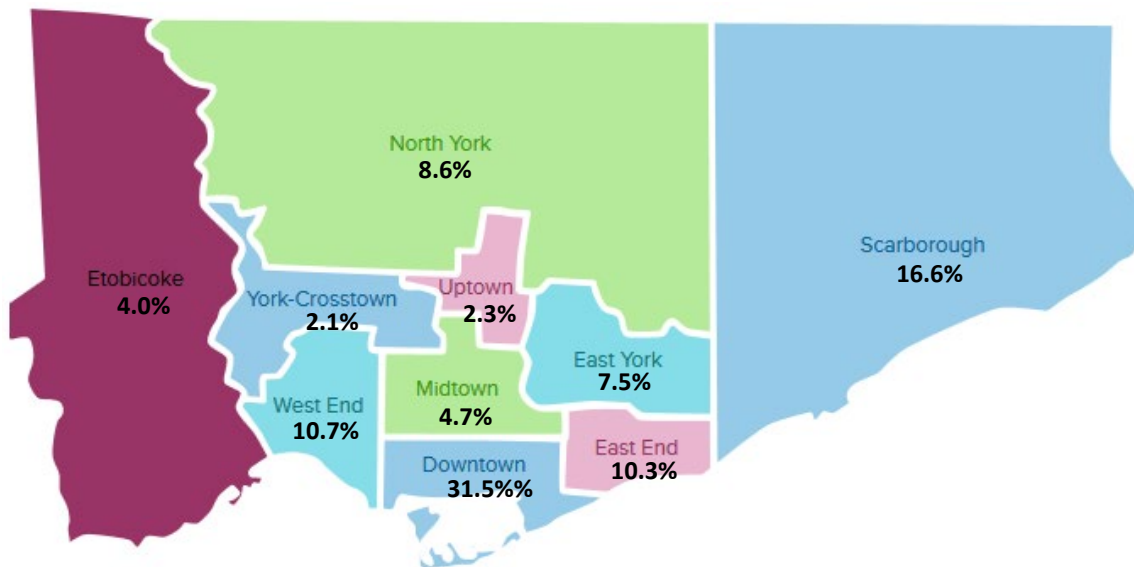
^v Children were not asked to participate, so the survey sample comprises individuals who are age 15 or older.

Residents from across the Toronto region participated in the survey, the majority of whom have a long presence in Toronto. More than two-thirds of those surveyed either were born in Toronto (38%) or had lived in the city for more than 14 years (29%), with only 18% having lived in the Toronto area for fewer than seven years. For those who have moved to Toronto from elsewhere, the most common reasons given were because of family, friends, or partners (36%), work or school (35%), and/or a lifestyle change (35%). Others cited housing, services, or opportunities not being available in their home communities; others said that events beyond their control, such as adoption, addictions, fleeing violence, or homelessness, had brought them to the city.

“My mother moved me and my siblings here to escape racism and for better opportunities.”

Survey Participation by Location:

The sum of all regions is less than 100% as some participants indicated they did not have a fixed address.



Seventy-eight percent of the survey participants self-identified as First Nations (of which 78% were Status), 17% Métis, and 4% Inuit. Seventy-one percent identified with a home community, spanning almost 150 nations and communities across nine provinces (all except P.E.I.) and two territories (Nunavut and N.W.T.). Of those who have a home community, 20% have never visited, 41% visit infrequently or for special gatherings such as a funeral, and 26% visit their home community regularly, several times a year. Participants cite distance, travel costs, and, more recently, the pandemic as reasons for the difficulties in traveling to their home communities. With no active connection to their First Nation, many rely on the Indigenous community of Toronto for their community connection.

“We used to visit more so when I was younger, but our grandparents lived on the outside [of the reserve] and we never knew it was Mohawk land. They kept it hidden.”

^{vi} 6% chose not to identify their gender.

WHAT WE HEARD

The following section is a summary of the knowledge shared from the members of the community who participated in the community circles and the survey. The compiling of the community voice was not meant to evaluate any specific agency or service, and it does not. Some experiences of community members are and continue to be difficult as their needs remain unmet. Items shared in the following section may be of a critical nature but are the expressions shared by community members who are also greatly appreciative of the work of TASSC member agencies. People reaffirmed their preference to use services that are accountable back to them, that understand them, are Indigenous-led and Indigenous-staffed, and that see them through an Indigenous heart, as a whole person. Indigenous agencies have achieved a significant impact in providing services and supports to the community. However, what is presented below is exclusively focused on what was raised during the community circle discussions and the survey.

The history of the urban Indigenous community in Toronto was born out of oppression and displacement, caused by colonial policies that aspired to keep Indigenous people on reserves and out of urban spaces. The Friendship Centre movement birthed the Indigenous cultural and social services movement and fuelled our historic and contemporary resiliency. “We were here, we are here, and we are proud of who we are.” There exists a strong sense of community and belonging and a code of ethics holding up mutual support. The community values the space to be together, to work alongside each other, and to have a community presence in the city. The Indigenous agencies are recognized as gathering places, while also helping people. Support within the Indigenous community is not limited to the agencies, as there is ample kindness and generosity shown by everyone.

“The Indigenous community sticks together and is always willing to help out anybody in need.”

A major source of pride for the Indigenous community comes from being able to practice and celebrate Indigenous culture. Community has built a strong presence in Toronto’s urban setting, and being able to learn, teach, and/or appreciate Indigenous arts, languages, activities, and ceremonies within the city is important and celebrated. Indigenous community members are also proud to share their culture with other Canadians and to be recognized for their Indigenous heritage.

“I am proud of who I am and of being acknowledged.”

The community is proud of its resilience. Despite a difficult history of colonization and oppression that exists to this day, Indigenous people survive and adapt and make a life for themselves in the city.

“As far as I have seen in my lifetime, our community continues to endure and to grow.”

Community members hoped to one day be free from discrimination and oppression. For some, a hope to be honoured as partners in building Toronto was a dream that included the belief that Indigenous people could help shape a better city for everyone. For many, the wish is for equality. Equal justice, a recognition of the principle of self-determination, Indigenous spaces to connect with each other and with the natural world, and more opportunities—all were aspirations brought to our conversations. Seeing themselves reflected in all decisions that affect their lives is perhaps the strongest of all the hopes coming out of the conversations.

“Having a stronger voice in the decision-making process about the future direction of Toronto.”

“Having our own land-based community.”

“Keeping the peace. Let go of the hate.”

Many in the community want access to housing and want the standard of housing raised. People recognized TASSC agencies as important to them and want more social services and supports. The community also identified the need for more opportunities to gather as a community and to celebrate and nurture their relationships.

“More community social gatherings to celebrate the good life and each other. More chances to sing, dance, and share.”

Overall, participants expressed their hopes in many ways, but all envisioned a community of loving and growing people navigating life’s challenges together. People wanted good health, peace, self-love, to find meaningful employment, to find a home or to find love, to learn more about their culture and participate in more community activities and ceremonies, to serve their peers, and to be reunited with family. The community looks towards a more harmonious future for everyone—one that continues to bring a better life to all.

“To be a more unified community.”

“That there is a future for our Native children.”

CULTURE – THEMES: VISIBILITY; STRENGTH IN MAINTAINING AND RECLAIMING TRADITIONAL WAYS OF BEING, SEEING, KNOWING, AND DOING; LOSS OF CULTURE; ROLE OF ELDERS; LANGUAGE; INDIGENOUS CULTURAL DIVERSITY

“Culture” was not an isolated topic of discussion. The Indigenous community spoke about how it is rooted in every aspect of living and is a part of the Indigenous value system, ways of expression, art, and storytelling, making it integral to all parts of the Indigenous way of life.

Visibility – The lack of greater Indigenous visibility is a concern. While members of the community noted recent improvements in the city through art installations, murals, and cultural events, the limited presence of Indigenous art, culture, and history across the city weighs heavily on some. They would like to see Indigenous cultural identity better represented in Toronto, telling the history of the land and the story of Toronto and of the Indigenous peoples.

“Growing up in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, we had totem poles around the city and Native art on buildings. They have Native art on the City Hall of Prince Rupert. And you don't see a lot of that here in Toronto, for a city that's so diverse, probably one of the most diverse cities in North America, if not the world. And I don't see that representation that I grew up with here and I would like to see more of it.”

Strength in Maintaining and Reclaiming Traditional Ways of Being, Seeing, Knowing, and Doing – The community sees the importance of traditional ways and values. They value a time when everyone had roles and responsibilities and communities cared for each other with a sense of purpose and belonging. Traditional communities worked together as a whole, were centred around children, and were surrounded by the Elders and other supports. Many teachings direct us to look back while also looking forward, to ensure the best understandings and outcomes are afforded to people today. The community believes traditional ways would eliminate many problems and could finally address the need to heal from colonial trauma.

“Cultural values, teachings, and traditions are critical to achieving a good life or a good mind. The passage of knowledge from Elders and Knowledge Keepers to the next generation is critical for cultural continuity.”

Cultural reclamation is enormously important for many. Of those surveyed:

- 39% were not raised in their Indigenous culture,
- 28% grew up in a non-Indigenous home with little to no access to Indigenous culture, and
- 14% felt that Indigenous culture was discouraged in their home.

The survey showed an active improvement for those who have access to cultural supports:

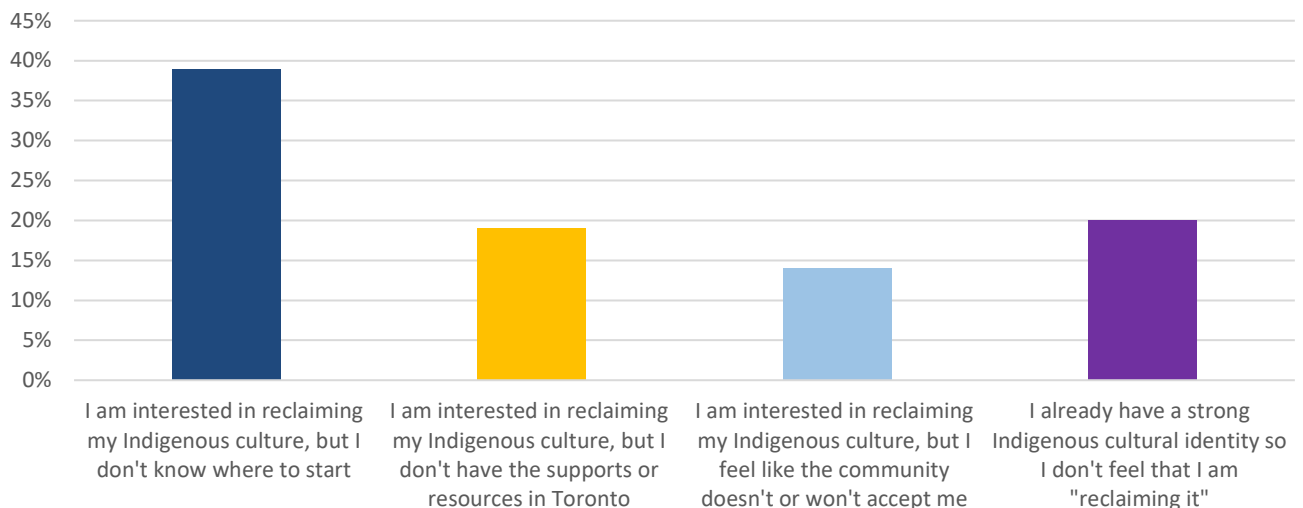
- 47% of those surveyed indicated that they see themselves as being in the process of reclaiming their Indigenous culture/identity,
- 20% feel they already have a strong Indigenous identity and therefore do not see themselves as “reclaiming” it, and
- 11% feel they are not connected to their Indigenous culture or identity.

Still, there are many who need support in their journey of reclamation:

- 39% don't know where to start,
- 19% don't have the supports or resources in Toronto, and
- 14% feel like the community doesn't or won't accept them.

“As a Native man, I feel unwelcome in the Native community because I never grew up in my Native culture. I grew up in the city with little to no access to my Native culture. I would like more access to art, art shows, art gigs, dance gigs, pow wows. I would like Native people to talk to each other more and support each other more.”

Reclaiming your Indigenous culture: Which of these statements do you identify with?



Loss of Culture – The loss of culture was raised with urgency by the community. The community is focused on reconnecting with traditional ways of being, through relearning their languages and traditions. One of the biggest barriers to this cultural reclamation is lack of access. Many Indigenous people who live in urban settings (and especially those who are city born and raised) have difficulty accessing traditional culture and teachings. Just connecting to the land in this urban environment is a huge challenge. This, coupled with the loss of the most precious carriers of culture, the Elders, means that it is very difficult to connect with this most important part of Indigenous life.

“We need more traditional Elders to teach the next generations, Indigenous and non-Indigenous—all people—willing to learn to protect and respect the land.”

The community expressed the need to create more opportunities for Elders and Traditional Knowledge Holders to transfer cultural knowledge. Community supports based on traditional practices are needed, ones that are not embedded in the Western way of thinking. The community greatly benefits when it has access to Traditional Knowledge Holders, Elders, Métis Senators, grandparents, aunties, and uncles. Urban Indigenous people wishing to practice their culture and ceremonies need to have spaces to hold sacred fires, direct access to living water (rivers, streams, lakes), and to have land on which to ground themselves.

Role of Elders – The discussions identified the need to clearly distinguish what constitutes an Elder or a Traditional Knowledge Holder and what these titles entail. A vetting system to identify recognized Elders and Traditional Knowledge Holders was suggested. It was also expressed that there is a need to identify and support more Elders and Traditional Knowledge Holders in the community, who collectively are representative of all the nations present in Toronto.

“An Elder is not self-appointed. An Elder does not need to say they’re an Elder. They are recognized as an Elder by the community.”

Language – Language is fundamental to Indigenous culture. Of those surveyed, 42% felt disconnected from their traditional language and possessed no knowledge of their traditional language. Less than 4% are fluent (primarily in Ojibway, Cree, and Inuktitut), with an additional 15% indicating they have some conversational skills in their traditional language. Those who had greater traditional language skills were older, with almost three-quarters of those who are fluent being 65+ years old.

“I want to learn my language before I pass on. To me this is important because learning and living the traditions make me feel whole as a Native woman.”

Indigenous Cultural Diversity – The Inuit and Métis urban populations greatly appreciate being recognized and included as part of the city’s larger Indigenous population. The more recent addition of the Toronto and York Region Métis Council (TYRMC) and the Toronto Inuit Association (TIA) as TASSC member agencies has been a positive development in support of this inclusion. Métis and Inuit communities in the city have experienced challenges in accessing cultural resources specific to them; the evolution of the TYRMC and TIA and their presence at TASSC is driving change in this area.

HOUSING – THEMES: HOME OWNERSHIP; SYSTEMIC RACISM IN HOUSING; HOUSING WAITLIST; DIGNITY; SUPPORTING THOSE TRANSITIONING FROM HOMELESSNESS; HOMELESSNESS; BREAKING THE CYCLE OF HOMELESSNESS

Housing is a complex topic. Rents are unaffordable, there are too few available housing options, waitlists are getting longer, and some of the housing that is provided lacks dignity. These issues, paired with the collective experience of racism, discrimination, and bias when pursuing housing, produce a shared feeling of powerlessness and unending stress. People are pressured to accept that if you are housed you should be grateful, regardless of the quality of the accommodation. Many in the community experience a constant fear of becoming homeless; some community members shared that they had recently been homeless or are currently homeless. Exacerbating this situation are rent increases, “renovictions,” abusive unit owners, housing expulsions, and economic insecurity. Parents who find themselves in these precarious housing environments can experience the fear of losing their children and not being able to regain custody without having “system-deemed-appropriate” housing.

Home Ownership – Only 6.3% of participants surveyed indicated that they are homeowners, ten times less than the rest of Toronto. The cost of home ownership in the city presents an insurmountable hurdle, even with steady employment, and rent-to-own programs are non-existent. The consensus was that an increased supply of affordable and rent-geared-to-income housing is critical. The community would like to see funders and providers thinking differently and discussing solutions that would enable more urban Indigenous people to own homes.

“Toronto is so incredibly unaffordable... the rental prices are through the roof. We have a 1% vacancy rate. We have 5- to 10-year waitlists for subsidized housing. We need more subsidized housing—immediately. We also need more supportive housing. But we need to address the barriers, too. There can be some pretty strict requirements on residents in supportive housing. And some people may opt to not access that supportive housing or be kicked out of it due to the struggle they’re dealing with—mental health, criminal issues, drug issues. So there needs to be more support built in around that, without such harsh penalties.”

“We need rent that’s actually in line with the real economy.”

“The government needs to prioritize people to have housing rather than the housing to have value.”

Systemic Racism in Housing – The Indigenous community faces racism, discrimination, and bias in addition to the housing crisis that the city is experiencing. It is not enough for the city to simply ensure there are affordable and suitable housing options when systemic racism is identified as a key barrier to accessing housing for the Indigenous community. Landlords can take one look at you and decide that they don’t want to rent to you based on your appearance—not just the colour of your skin but also, for the 2-Spirited community or queer community, your sexual orientation.

“I went to this one rental unit from a shelter and the owner said to me, ‘I can’t take you. I am not comfortable with you.’ To which I replied, ‘This is my way of life, my lifestyle.’ The conversation continued, yet in the end he held firm, that this is his building, ‘And I don’t have to take you.’”

When discussing housing, some community members reflected on the original treaties between the Indigenous peoples of the land and the settlers, their promise to co-exist without interfering with the Indigenous people and their way of life. It is felt that the spirit of the treaties is not being upheld today. The community wants to see a real long-term commitment and intent to co-exist with the Indigenous community. One suggestion from

community members was to have more Indigenous community housing included in new developments. Individuals shared that they don't see creating Indigenous-only housing developments as the solution; rather, they believe that it is important to create mixed housing and to bring the city's diverse populations together, with spaces secured for Indigenous individuals and families.

“The settlers who agreed to this treaty have not upheld their end because we see everything being privatized, all these buildings going up, but where’s the space for the Indigenous community in there? It doesn't exist. It's all privatized. They're not keeping up their end of the bargain and they continue to take the land and relocate the Indigenous community, as they have for so long.”

“They give you lip service by telling you, ‘Oh, we're going to build X amount of affordable housing units in Toronto, and there is a big photo op and congratulations, but then three years down the road they haven't done anything, and they've done nothing to help us at all.”

Members of the community are also frustrated by the barriers built into rental applications. Anyone who has had financial difficulties in the past, is in debt, or has a poor credit score is at a serious disadvantage when applying to rent. Youth also face challenges when entering the rental market as they lack credit histories and lease guarantors.

There are inadequate financial supports for housing in the city as Ontario Works (OW), Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), and the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) are not sufficient to pay rent. The cost of rent continues to rise, and financial support services are not keeping pace. Even with subsidies, people are finding that the cost of rent still exceeds their income. The table below shows how in most cases the cost of affordable housing in Toronto exceeds the financial supports adults receive, even after combining their monthly basic-needs and shelter allowances. If people who rely on these benefits manage to cover the cost of putting a roof over their head, then they don't have enough money left over to cover other critical necessities like utilities, groceries, and other basic needs.

Table 3: Comparison of Social Services Financial Supports to the City of Toronto Affordable Housing Rates

Social Services	Ontario Works ²¹		ODSP ²²	
	Single Person	Couple	Single Person	Couple
Family Unit				
Monthly Basic Needs Allowance	\$343	\$494	\$672	\$969
Maximum Monthly Shelter Allowance	\$390	\$624	\$497	\$781
Total Benefits	\$733	\$1,118	\$1,169	\$1,750
City of Toronto Affordable Housing Rates ²³	\$1,211 (Bachelor Apt)	\$1,431 (1-Bedroom Apt)	\$1,211 (Bachelor Apt)	\$1,431 (1-Bedroom Apt)
Remaining Monthly Funds After Rent	-\$478	-\$313	-\$42	\$319

Light must be shed on the gaps in services for people who are at risk of losing their housing. People shared many stories of being housed but, lacking any support, eventually losing their homes. Those at risk seem to be dealing with their challenges alone. There must be a support system put in place that is specifically designed for them and their needs.

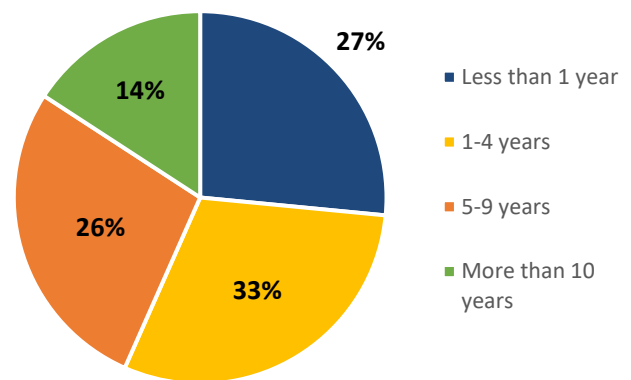
The following two stories illustrate the unique challenges faced by those who are vulnerable:

“Paying two grand for rent and worrying about this and that, while my actual fear right now is I pay \$2000 for rent. Every time I get promoted and move up in my professional life, I get further and further away from getting subsidized or geared-to-income housing because you can only make so much. And it’s frustrating because it’s like I’m barely making ends meet, because I have to pay so much for rent. And so, the fear of having a small son and being homeless, despite having a great job and a great career, yet still having that fear every day. I was on leave for two weeks because I was sick and my son was sick and I didn’t have any sick leave. It only gives you half of what you make and that pays my rent. But then how do I feed my son? How do I buy diapers? How do I pay for daycare, like all of these other things? So, I think that we’re like the working poor as Indigenous people, we’re never getting ahead.”

“It’s the whole ‘If you’re already housed, then you can wait,’ kind of housing situation. Before, I was barely making it when I was pregnant with my daughter and they’re, like, ‘Well, you have an apartment, so you’re good. We’ll put you on the waiting list.’ And so, anyways, I ended up losing everything and I ended up in a shelter and basically homeless with my daughter. And only then was I able to get subsidized housing. I appreciate that I was able to get a house after that, but at the same time it’s like did I really have to lose everything first?”

Housing Waitlists – Excessively long waitlists for Indigenous housing in Toronto create disappointment followed by frustration for applicants. Twenty-six percent of those surveyed are on a housing waitlist, of which almost half (48.5%) are with a Native housing organization. While some individuals have found stability due to more successful long-term housing placements, this has reduced the turnover rate. With a growing population and increasing housing needs, movement on waitlists has slowed to a snail’s pace. Now we are seeing community members on housing waitlists for 10 years and more (14% of those surveyed), and they are still waiting.

Duration on housing waitlists

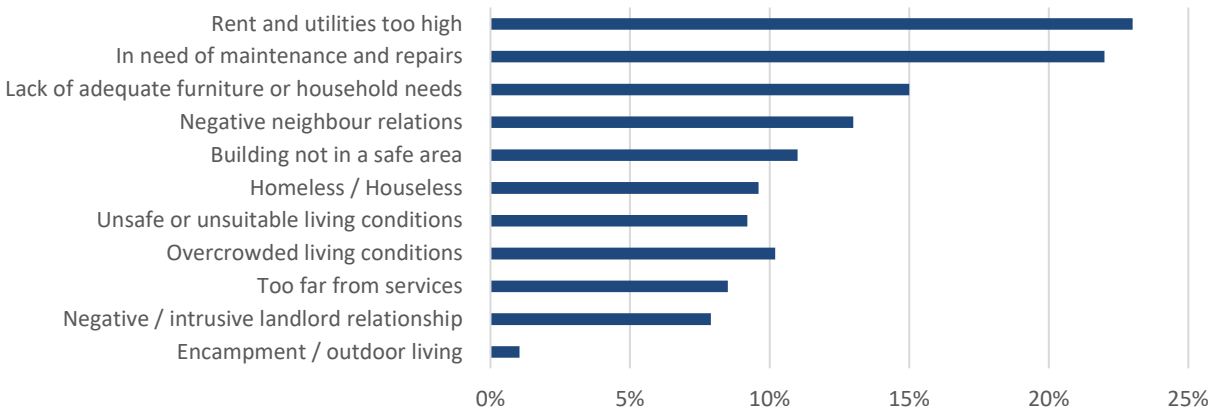


“Waitlists for everything, and then when you finally get housing, it’s not in good condition.”

“There are newcomers to Canada who are being provided housing before Indigenous people who have been here since time immemorable.”

Dignity – “Dignity” is a word that was brought up repeatedly in discussions about housing in the community. Many who live in affordable or rent-geared-to-income housing experience a prevailing lack of dignity because their homes may be in serious need of repairs, poorly designed, or built from poor-quality materials. Pests are common and the neighbourhoods can have higher rates of crime and violence. Of those surveyed, 67% reported one or more housing-related issues, with the two greatest being the high cost of rent and utilities (23%), followed by the poorly maintained state of the dwellings (22%).

Are you currently dealing with any of the following housing-related issues?



Some individuals in the community are reluctant to speak up about housing conditions out of fear it could jeopardize their housing security. There is an awareness within the community that Indigenous housing providers are at the mercy of government funders and that this is a significant limitation. Whatever the dynamics, the Indigenous community desires a respectful and dignified housing experience and hopes for the kind of homes that they can take pride in.

“I live in Native housing and once, when questioning the work a contractor was doing, I was told by the contractor to look at where I live, that I was lucky to get anything. Basically, they think they don’t have to do the job right because you’re poor and you should be grateful regardless.”

Those in Transition from Homelessness – For some, having a place to live is just the first step to staying housed successfully. They need built-in support while they are adjusting to being housed. There need to be programs that teach things such as managing and paying bills, home upkeep, and general life skills to manage everyday living. For many, it is a very long road to recovery with many risks. We were told that people need help every step of the way. This support could significantly help to keep transitioning community members in their new homes.

“We’re dying as I speak. What I really wanted to say is that transitioning to housing is a very good idea to help stop this. Maybe with interventions there can be some training, because some of us are not used to caring for our own places. Maybe they could install a program for people that need to get back into how to look after a home, the way that we used to in our culture and our way of life—that we always managed to keep our homes clean before colonization, in fact. Why don’t we get back to those roots and look after ourselves better, in a healthy way?”

Homelessness – The urban Indigenous community experiences homelessness at a much greater rate than the general population.

- 59% of those surveyed reported having experienced homelessness/houselessness in their lifetime.
- 13% of those surveyed do not have a fixed address (i.e., live in shelters, are staying with friends most nights, live in an encampment/outdoor dwelling, or are not currently housed). This is lower than the rate that some other studies have found, such as *Our Health Counts*, which found that 35% of Indigenous

adults in Toronto were precariously housed or experiencing homelessness at the time of the 2016 survey. Both of these findings far exceeding the 4% of the general Canadian adult population who have experienced homelessness or insecure housing in the past five years.²⁴

Many in the urban Indigenous community, both housed and unhoused, continue to live in unsafe conditions in the city. Fifty-one percent of those surveyed feel there are barriers for Indigenous people accessing shelters in Toronto. This is consistent with the attitudes of those currently using shelters (Indigenous and mainstream) but increases to 81% when those who identify as “not currently housed” specifically are asked. There are individuals in the city who do not see shelters as welcoming or safe and choose to live outside. Members of the community feel that there is an increased need for safer shelters or Indigenous shelters, due to stigma, racism, and negative judgment they have endured in the mainstream system.

“I know there is shelter, but sometimes getting in them is hard or not in safe areas or just way too far to get to, in hard times that are already hard.”

“Shelters are a colonial institution and are uncomfortable for Indigenous people generally.”

“Not enough spaces for people to live and have a human experience.”

Homelessness is not just about affordability. There are many people suffering from complex trauma that can lead them to become homeless. Participants felt homelessness had to be viewed as a normal and expected result of unhealed multi-generational and chronic trauma, and that it could be seen as part of a cycle stemming from the residential school system, the Sixties Scoop, and the systematic gradual breakdown of families and communities.

“Homelessness is connected to the Sixties Scoop because it’s all part of a cycle. Having kids young, not knowing where to go for support, and just everything builds on each other until it breaks. In the end, it basically leads to homelessness.”

People believe there’s a need for a different approach when supporting the homeless community, emphasizing more direct engagement to understand their individual needs. Community members want supports that meet them where they are at. This requires listening to the individuals to understand the barriers they experience, the strengths of the individual, and respecting the individuals wishes in what supports they desire and how that support looks in practice. There is a desire to acknowledge that every homeless person has their own story, and their story needs to be acknowledged to understand how they can be supported on their own path.

Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness – The community is strong in its conviction that we need to break this cycle. To do so, it was suggested that the community’s trauma must be addressed and healing must be achieved through both Indigenous and Western approaches. The traditional approaches include access to land that is safe, secure, and appropriate for ceremony. This is a challenge in Toronto. People want and need good traditional teachers and access to language speakers and to healers. Agencies should be able to provide such services and need to be supported by funders to do so.

The community also views healthy parenting as crucial to breaking this cycle. Children need to be gently guided and taught that trauma, crisis, and struggles within the families are not the norm for Indigenous peoples, that there was once greater balance in our lives and communities. Many said it was hard to remember how to parent in a healthy way. People would like to see more access to parenting support throughout the life cycle in keeping with traditional ways. This includes support for young parents, mature parents, grandparents, foster parents, and adoptive parents—all relations. Programs should be connected with Elders and grounded by traditional knowledge

and teachings so these ways of being and knowing are brought back into our communities. Parenting supports need to be provided without any fear of stigma, judgment, or intervention from Child Protection Services. Good prevention programs will eliminate the need for child aid society involvement altogether.

“Generations of families went through residential schools and came out traumatized. Instead of passing your problems on to your kids, you have to let your kids prosper and grow with the community and be what they want to be, as opposed to throwing your problems on them and then them carrying them on. Yes, I can understand teaching them and letting them know, educating them, but throwing your problems on them—no. That’s breaking the barrier. That’s breaking the cycle and moving forward.”

EDUCATION – THEMES: SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Indigenous peoples’ experiences with Western education are challenging and overshadowed by the legacy of residential schools. Of those surveyed,

- 31% don’t have a high-school education, and
- 31% have some form of post-secondary education (college, trade, university).

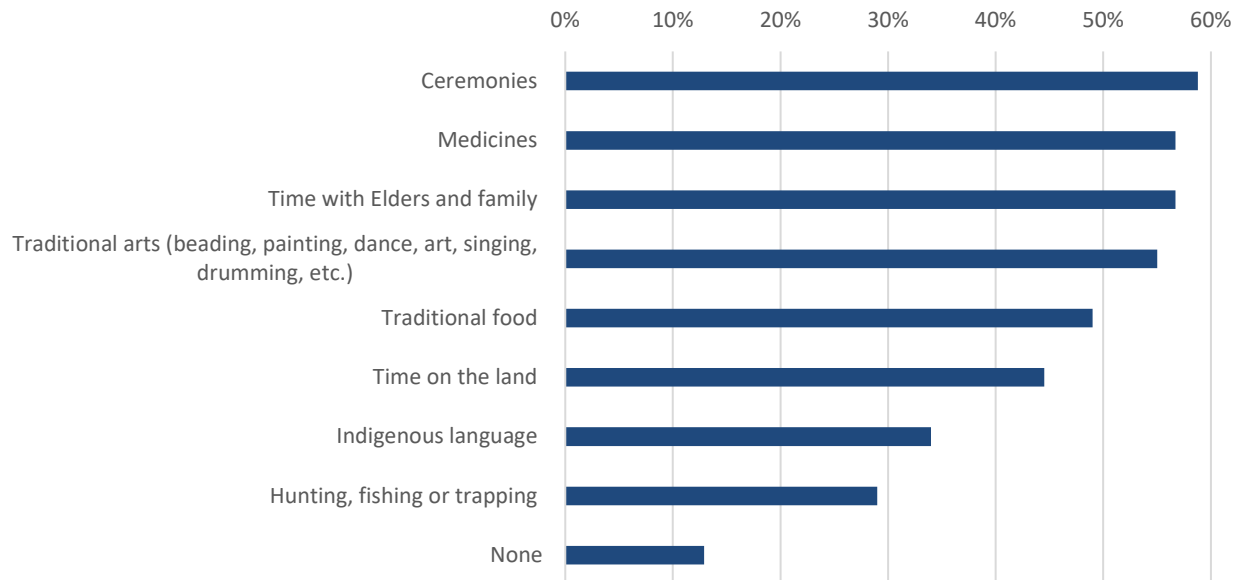
Systemic Barriers – Over half of the community (59%) feel there exist multiple barriers for Indigenous people in mainstream/Western education systems (an additional 18% agreed somewhat). They have experiences of culture shock and isolation with no connection to Indigenous peers or supports and are surrounded by micro-aggressions, ignorance of their culture, or flat-out racism. For many who come from remote and northern communities, this transition is especially difficult. Barriers to good education exist from the very outset and continue throughout the system. Indigenous early education programs are a good start, but Indigenous considerations need to be attended to throughout the system.

“Elementary school was tough living in a small White town. They immediately labelled me as a problem. I wasn’t—I was a child.”

“I feel I am seen as different or an inconvenience the education system needs to take care of.”

The community is a library. It is a rich and abundant source of Indigenous teachings. More than half of the participants see themselves as learning at least a bit about Indigenous culture through time with Elders, traditional medicines, and ceremonies. However, 13% of the community members surveyed identify as having no cultural education or experiences.

Cultural learnings and experiences held by community members



EMPLOYMENT – THEMES: EXCLUSION; UNDEREMPLOYED

The Indigenous community in Toronto faces much greater exclusion from the workforce and higher unemployment than the city's general population. Thirty percent of those surveyed are unemployed^{vii} and 14% have never had a job. Of those employed, 41% report earning less than a living wage.^{viii} Those on Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) receive much less than a living wage, at \$1169–\$2256 (couple with max dependents \$2393) per month, based on the status of their dependents, or \$733–\$1467 (couple with max dependents \$1496) per month for Ontario Works (OW). Twenty percent reported receiving a monthly income from OW and 23% from ODSP. Of those individuals, 52% have been on OW or ODSP for five or more years. Forty-seven percent of those on OW or ODSP are multigenerational receivers, meaning their parents and/or grandparents were/are also receiving OW or ODSP.

Only 8.7% of survey participants indicated that they receive Family and Caregiver Benefits, and this increased to just 15.7% for those with children residing in the same home. While this study may not reflect a completely accurate percentage of those who are eligible for the Family and Caregiver Benefits, it does indicate that a significant portion of the community is not accessing financial benefits for which they are eligible.

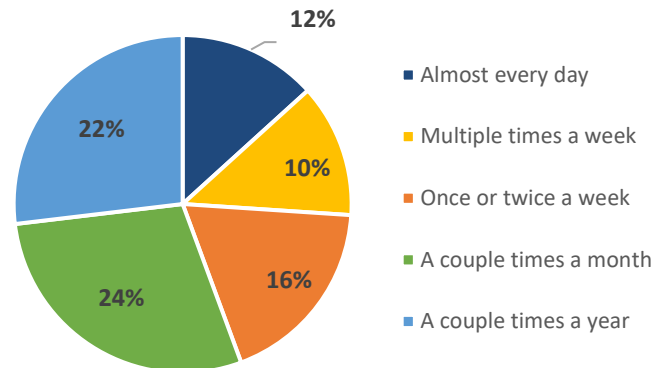
^{vii} This is independent of those not seeking employment (3.4%) and those on leave (2.2%) or retired (9.3%).

^{viii} In Toronto this has been set at \$22.08 an hour, \$3,680 a month or \$44,160 a year.

SERVICES AND SUPPORTS – THEMES: AWARENESS; NAVIGATION; TRUST; CONSISTENCY; ACCESS; STAFFING

An overwhelming majority (83%) of those surveyed agreed that poverty is an issue. Additionally, 35% feel that poverty relief and assistance programs are not able to meet the needs of Indigenous people. Sixty percent agree that when accessing social services the Indigenous community faces greater barriers and challenges compared to other residents of Toronto. There is a high level of distrust for mainstream colonial systems, leading community members to avoid these services and rely instead on Indigenous agencies to meet their needs. Community members stressed the importance of mainstream social workers needing to work in culturally safe and competent ways and to be educated on what is available for their Indigenous clients.

How often do you currently access Indigenous organizations for Indigenous programs and/or services?



“From being unable to do taxes, to needing Status cards to apply to things, it’s much harder.”

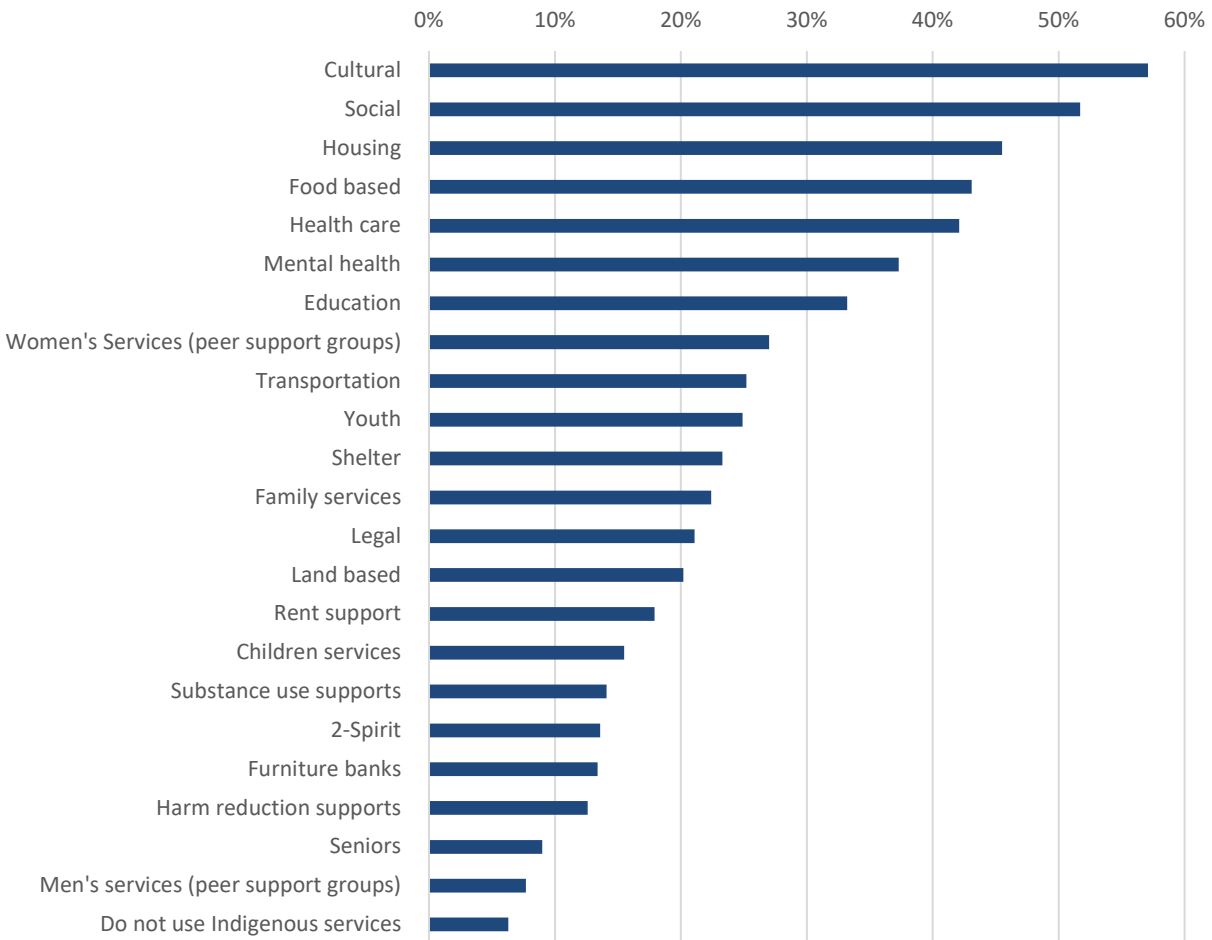
“At times I can feel people are just uncomfortable with a Native.”

Awareness – Indigenous agencies in Toronto provide a wide and well-utilized spectrum of services. Twelve percent of those surveyed interact with Indigenous organizations, programs, or services almost every day. Some community members expressed the need for better communication regarding available services. They would like to see information about Indigenous organizations visible across the city (e.g., through posters, on public transit ads, in public spaces, online) and to go to where they are, both physically and virtually. Online resources such as the Tkaronto Indigenous Peoples Portal (TIPP)^{ix} need to be further developed, and more Indigenous references must be added to existing mainstream online resources. Hard-copy guides need to be published and broadly distributed to the people who need them. Community members want to be able to locate Indigenous-specific foods, gatherings, ceremonies, clothing, education, employment, job postings, and Indigenous crafters and vendors. This is particularly important for people new to the city who need support on multiple levels if they are to establish themselves in a good way.

Navigation – Available and accurate information alone will not solve the challenge of connecting service users with the appropriate resources. There is a perception held by some in the community that whether it is “feast or famine” depends on how well you can navigate the system. People describe frustration in navigating the system. Too often, they feel that they have taken the initiative to reach out or inquire about a program or service, only to receive no response or discover that it is no longer available. They experience poor communication from program staff and information about services is hard to obtain. Community organizations need to be appropriately responsive to people who show initiative and self-refer, and they must do their best to never turn people away.

^{ix} <https://live.indigenousto.ca/>

What types of Indigenous programs and/or services have you used?



Consistency – Services need to be consistent so that they can be depended on over time. It is recognized that most problems experienced by Indigenous people are complex and that, before healing can begin, a lot of time is needed to build trust. The community needs to know that they can rely on these services and on the staff who provide them. Funding gaps that lay off valuable staff create chaos and staff turnover results in gaps in program knowledge. The relationship between provider and recipient is key to effective support. This relationship was seen as continually compromised by erratic and short-term funding.

“Every time we get comfortable with someone, [the program] ends or it is not available anymore—that person leaves the organization and then you have to start all over again. It gets to the point where it is no longer worth starting again from the beginning.”

“If we have somebody who’s leaving a position, there needs to be a plan in place for that transition to take place. Too often that person just kind of disappears and the families served by them are not cared for.”

There exists a large population of Indigenous people who “age out” or otherwise become disqualified from services on which they are dependent. There is typically a lack of transition to other services, even though a person may still need them. Creating a system of smooth and gentle transition for our most vulnerable people was felt to be the necessary and the proper thing to do.

“How come some of the organizations you age out of? And then, all of a sudden, there’s nothing for you? So you reach the max age of their program and then it’s, like, ‘Good luck next time.’”

Trust – 6.3% of those surveyed indicated that they do not utilize Indigenous services. Reasons for not engaging with Indigenous services include the following: community members are not in need of the services, they are having access issues, or they are not aware of what is available. Some say services have discriminated against them because of their mixed parentage and skin colour. Some indicated that they suffer from “imposter syndrome” (e.g., experiencing untrue thoughts that they are not part of the Indigenous community), which then makes them uncomfortable about accessing services meant for the Indigenous community. Others shared that they don’t trust the agencies or their staff due to the colonial legacies of family disruption and child removal.

Access – Access to services is compromised in several ways. The community needs to have better access to programs, and programs must operate outside of the hours of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to be accessible and more meaningful to the community. Many support staff are called upon outside of service hours and this difficult work is not accommodated or compensated for. Staff burn out and those receiving services suffer. Service hours need to be adjusted to meet client needs and not be restricted to outdated mainstream approaches.

Many participants spoke about the lack of communication and coordination among Indigenous services. Some organizations only use social media to inform the community of its services, but not all community members access social media platforms when searching for services, resources, or help. The community voiced a desire for agencies to work together holistically so that individual approaches and the best approach is used when helping people. Being family-oriented and having a multigenerational focus was seen as important.

The rental market in Cabbagetown, the Toronto Indigenous community’s historic centre, has become unaffordable and homeownership there is all but impossible. The Indigenous community is increasingly settling in the Toronto suburbs of North York, Scarborough, and Etobicoke, yet most services remain located downtown. Set service area boundaries are a concern: some individuals said that after they had made the effort to travel great distances to access services, they were deemed to be living outside of an organization’s catchment region and the services were denied.

Staffing – While the existence of Indigenous services was highly valued, questions were posed as to their capacity to meet the community’s service requirements. High staff turnover and hiring pressures can result in workers who have not been properly trained and supervised. Forty-four percent agree that there has been an increase in supports available to them, but 10% do not agree. Thirty-one percent are satisfied with the quality of available Indigenous services, whereas 24% are dissatisfied. Being subjected to unprofessional conduct was cited, such as favouritism or special treatment for some while others get turned away. Some members felt that biases toward certain groups existed and that this should be openly addressed.

People felt that staff need to be Indigenous if they are representatives of an Indigenous organization. This holds for all aspects of the organization, including upper management and boards of directors. All involved should be culturally knowledgeable and grounded by Indigenous values.

“I think it can be a problem to different degrees with different organizations, but there is an issue of front-facing staff being Indigenous and then upper management or board members not being Indigenous. Our agencies shouldn’t just appear to be Indigenous—they should be Indigenous.”

Conversations sometimes led to discussions about the mainstream system. People often felt unsafe accessing such services and would like to see authentic Indigenous representation in that world as well. Some said it would be a good idea to have Indigenous staff from Indigenous agencies “embedded” within the mainstream to best attend to their needs. The right people for this work are not just Indigenous; they are ideally directly connected to the community through an Indigenous organization and are recognizable, have relationships already established, and are trusted.

FINANCIAL STABILITY – THEMES: FINANCIAL LITERACY; BASIC NEEDS; FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

Not surprisingly, the lack of income or funds, the need to rebuild credit, significant consolidated debt, and the lack of access to credit and or safe and trusted supports for financial health were all identified as barriers to financial stability and prosperity. People were not able to focus on the future; the idea of having money to invest was a foreign one. They struggled from day to day and paycheck to paycheck, and some community members are relying on food banks or second-hand shoes for their children. Despite these issues, the typical aspiration was to be debt-free, to begin building credit, and to get affordable housing.

“In my experiences, I find that having a really bad credit score doesn’t get you a good apartment in a great location. I don’t want to be stuck with this. I would like to have help rebuilding my credit so that I can build my credit score so I can get that amazing apartment.”

Financial Literacy – Most, especially young adults, said that financial literacy is low in the community and that even a basic understanding of how things work is lost on some. People need financial assistance and many are steered towards cash-advance and payday-lender businesses. Financial services and supports are needed that will not judge or have preconceived notions or unrealistic expectations. What is needed is not just one simple educational workshop, but ongoing supports that build people’s capacity to manage the little money they might have.

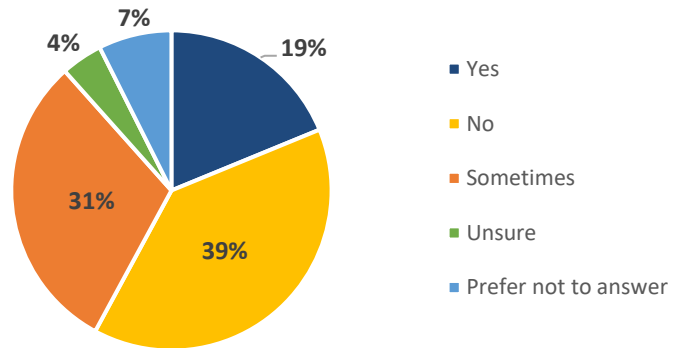
Of those surveyed:

- 9.4% don’t have bank accounts, more than twice the national rate of “unbanked” Canadians (3%),²⁵
- 8.7% have used cash-advance or payday-lender services, and
- 33% have credit cards (4.8% of these are prepaid cards), less than half of the national rate (83%).²⁶

“I wish to see Indigenous people get rich—rich with culture and generational wealth. I wish that the Indigenous community would stop the lateral violence against each other and learn to support each other unconditionally.”

Basic Needs – 39% of those surveyed indicated that after their rent or other housing expenses were paid, they did not have enough money left to meet their basic needs. (32% are short of meeting their basic needs or are in need of borrowing \$100–\$300 a month; 25% were needing more than \$300.) *Our Health Counts* found that over a third of Indigenous adults gave up key needs (e.g., groceries, transportation) to meet shelter/housing-related costs at least once a month. Fifty-four percent have at one point used a food bank, community kitchen, or similar service to avoid going hungry, with 41% of those actively using these services at least once a week or more. This indicates a much greater level of food insecurity than in the general population of Toronto.

After your rent or other housing expenses are paid, do you feel you usually have enough money left for your or your family's basic needs?



Financial Management Support – Some members of the community have received entitlements, one-time legal settlements, or other substantial infusions of cash. This can be, for some, problematic for many reasons. It can, for example, introduce sudden wealth to individuals who have never had savings and are not equipped to translate their change in finances into sustainable improvements of their financial status or quality of life. The process of receiving payments in response to historical wrongdoings at times carries its own barriers, such as the administrative requirements and rigorous processes that need to be navigated. It also can expose recipients to emotional harm by requiring them to revisit traumatic experiences. Additionally, being “awarded” a sum of money assessed as the “value” of the pain and suffering one has experienced can be dehumanizing. Many felt that pursuing settlements to which they are entitled may not be worth the trouble. The community recognizes the need for more financial management resources that are trusted, culturally safe, and demonstrate an understanding of the priorities and challenges of Indigenous people. Help is often needed to support people to turn an influx of large amounts of money into sustainable and growing prosperity.

JUSTICE AND POLICE – THEMES: DEPRIORITIZATION; UNJUST TREATMENT

Deprioritization – Participants acknowledged that the Indigenous community is not important to the justice system. Gains made over time have been diminished and given little attention, except in the case of hardline law enforcement. At the community level, it was reported that emergency services sometimes took hours to respond regardless of the level of need.

“We are at the bottom of their list.”

Unjust Treatment – There is a common fear of unjust treatment when dealing with the police. Stories were shared about police intimidation. Of those surveyed:

- 60% feel that they or someone close to them has experienced discrimination by police,

- 60% have had a negative experience with Toronto Police,
- 33% have an overall negative view of Toronto Police,
- 40% have been arrested or charged with a criminal offence, and
- 24% have been in one of the Gladue Courts in Toronto.

100% of community members surveyed had negative experiences with police and the justice system, and there appears to be no enthusiasm for finding solutions—the community struggles to see the justice system as anything but a barrier. The Canadian justice system is still seen as a colonial structure, and the community would like to see a more restorative justice system, one that aligns with their traditional ways, in their communities.

“I feel like the police treated me differently than they would a non-Indigenous person.”

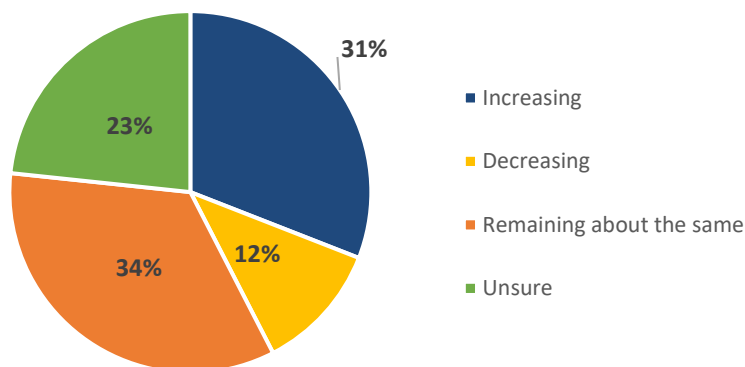
RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION – THEMES: TRUTH; LATERAL VIOLENCE

Truth – People shared that the general Canadian population needs to learn the real history of Canada and their understanding needs to change. Speaking truth is essential if there is to be reconciliation. The Indigenous community itself was seen as needing to educate each other and share each other’s teaching and stories. Participants felt that even if all Torontonians took cultural safety training programs, it would not be enough. They felt that in order to create meaningful change, Torontonians need to develop long-term relations with the Indigenous community who also call the city home.

“They erased a lot of our history—they changed it to benefit themselves.”

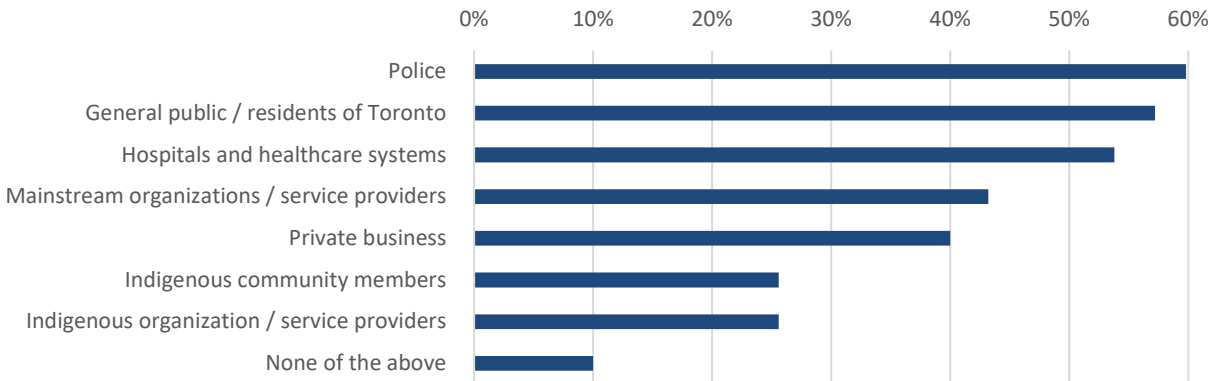
Three-quarters of those surveyed agreed that racism towards Indigenous people by non-Indigenous people is a problem in Toronto, with 31% who feel that racism against Indigenous people by non-Indigenous people in Toronto is increasing, compared to 12% who feel that it is decreasing.

Do you feel that racism against Indigenous people by non-Indigenous people is increasing or decreasing in Toronto?



“When using my Status card anywhere, I have experienced a lot of sadness doing this. The workers and the establishments make me feel scared to use it.”

Do you feel that you, your family or someone close to you experienced racism or discrimination in Toronto as an Indigenous person from any of the following?



Lateral Violence – The face of the Toronto Indigenous community is diverse. There are individuals from hundreds of different First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities from across Canada present in Toronto. Within the Toronto Indigenous community, 59% of those surveyed are of mixed heritage. An example of this is the growing populations of Afro-Indigenous and other mixed-race Indigenous youth who may not “look” Indigenous. This is a challenge for those who can be made to feel disconnected from their Indigeneity or experience exclusion. This can also be the experience of the Métis and Inuit members of the community, as those who are not Anishinaabe sometimes perceive themselves as “outsiders” within the Indigenous community in Toronto based on their own observations or experiences. As many as a quarter of survey participants felt discrimination based on differences in appearance, skin and hair colour, degree of Indigenous descent, and nation membership. Community members referenced “crabs in a bucket,” where people want to pull each other down instead of lifting each other up. There is also the experience of discrimination and exclusion within the community by those who present as “White-passing” or who are non-Status.

“We need more lateral-violence awareness. There is a lot of toxicity in our community and gossip that needs to stop.”

IMPOSED WESTERN SYSTEMS AND IMPACTS – THEMES: STATUS; RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Status – People had a lot to say about their frustrations about keeping their Indian Status cards up to date. They cited multiple bureaucratic barriers and intrusive scrutiny. The expiration of Status is viewed as entirely inappropriate as it implies that it is up to the government to define your identity.

“Nowhere else in the world do people culturally expire—why would the Indigenous people in Canada expire as a people?”

“My biggest concern is why are non-Indigenous people making decisions for what they think is best for Indigenous people—why are our own people not helping us to make decisions for ourselves based on our knowledge of our people and our culture? It’s so wrong.”

Residential Schools – Fifty eight percent of those surveyed chose to share that they are residential school/Indian day school survivors or the direct descendant of a survivor. Many shared how the experience continues to affect them to this day. Shared trauma, addictions, silence, and losing loved ones too early in their lives were cited as common experiences.

“My mom went to day school on Baffin Island. She died of the complications of alcoholism when she was 43. I was 17.”

“My parents lacked parental role models due to residential school attendance and emulated their residential school tormenters in discipline and relationships with all members of our family.”

“I have family members who are survivors, because I would not be here if it wasn’t for them.”

CHILD WELFARE – THEMES: FAMILY SEPARATIONS; TARGETING; RE-ENVISIONING

Family Separations – Many told of the fear of accessing organizations that have services directly linked to child protection. In Toronto, the fact that multiple services are provided through one central agency that carries the child protection mandate is a common concern and echoed repeatedly. Many stated that regardless of need, they would not accept services from this system because they feared they’d be watched and evaluated. The residential school system’s removal of children, together with the Sixties Scoop experience, has created a fundamental lack of trust that continues unabated. Fear of losing children again to a system—no matter how benign or how it is presented—needs to be addressed fundamentally. Of those surveyed, 44% have been involved with the child welfare system. Some are Sixties Scoop survivors and others have lost their own children, some permanently.

Cultural genocide has been well-documented as the historical legacy of child protection services and outcomes for most have been extremely poor. Community members who have grown up in care face long-term challenges such as estrangement from family and community, culture, traditions, and language, in addition to the immediate trauma of their apprehension when they were children.

“I was a Crown ward till I was 18 years old. I don’t know who I am and I don’t belong anywhere.”

“As a child I had 13 different foster homes.”

Targeting – Many in the community share a deeply entrenched sense of injustice within the child welfare system. They feel that people dealing with the threat of child apprehension lack support, do not generally have access to advocates, and lack sufficient information about their rights or the rights of their children.

Many expressed that child welfare agencies, Indigenous or not, do not honour or support traditional concepts of child and family well-being. Many spoke of experiencing trauma from intervention services due to the significant practice of apprehension. They spoke of the need for increased preventative services to stop the cycle of harm in the community. Community members who had been involved as children in the child welfare system felt that the system was perpetuating intergenerational harm against them by labelling them as poor parents and putting them under a microscope with even more scrutiny. This has led to a feeling of helplessness, with the odds being stacked against them, imposing further stress on families.

Two community members told of multiple failed attempts to regain custody of their children, which led to their eventual reactive decline and subsequent incarceration. Neither had any previous involvement with the justice system prior to their children being apprehended. Those surveyed widely believe that the Western-model child welfare system causes and continues to perpetuate harm because of its approach.

“As Indigenous people, there is a target on each of us from Child Protection Services. The system is harder on the Indigenous community, and when the community is involved with Indigenous child welfare we are not met by Indigenous staff, and so there still isn’t the cultural safety in the system.”

Re-Envisioning – Members in the community feel that the Indigenous child welfare system must be re-envisioned to focus on the best interest of the children and be based on traditional values. The system needs to be better at using the strength of the community to keep children in their homes and to get their caregivers the help they need without resorting to child removal, which causes such trauma.

Some members of the community strongly support separating child and family services and the support services from child welfare protection agencies. Access to services like child and family centres, EarlyON programs, and other prevention services should not be through an agency also dedicated to legal intervention under the authority of provincial legislation that has inflicted so much harm in the past.

“Child welfare systems seem to be expanding in scope and in their relationships with other providers. Services that used to be community-based are now mainstream in their approach and are as inaccessible and disconnected as mainstream ones.”

HEALTH AND WELLNESS – THEMES: INDIGENOUS PROVIDERS; NIHB BARRIERS; SUBSTANCE MISUSE

Healthcare and well-being were not focuses of this inquiry, yet many spoke of their specific challenges and their struggles to get help. A key area was support for both children and adults with special needs, whether those were delayed development or mental health issues. Again, a lack of appropriate services was identified.

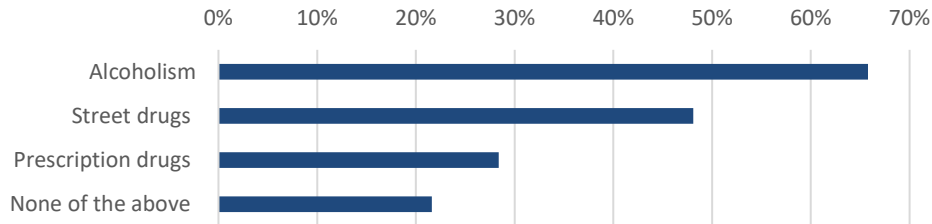
Indigenous Providers – The community needs to have access to Indigenous professionals with a good understanding of the issues and who operate within an Indigenous framework. There is a comfort that comes from being able to access a care provider who is from your community. Many participants stated that they avoid medical services, especially hospitals, and will sometimes not disclose their identity when seeking help due to the experience of racism in the system.

“I went one time for my diabetes check-up. I never had this doctor before. First question he asked me was if I was drinking, if I drank today.”

NIHB Barriers – Status Indians are entitled to receive Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB). However, participants pointed out that using those benefits is difficult—they change constantly and what was approved last week will not be the same this week. This situation is made worse by pharmacists and medical practitioners who are ill-informed and unfamiliar with the NIHB program. People felt that there was a bias toward denial of rightful benefits and often saw an uncaring attitude toward vulnerable people.

Substance Misuse – A majority of those surveyed (82%) have experienced some form of substance misuse. Many are celebrating multiple years of sobriety, and some are feeling the benefit of newfound sobriety. Overall, the community recognizes that addiction remains a significant concern. However, they also see many individuals have successfully overcome the historically debilitating impacts this issue has had on members of the community.

Have you ever experienced substance misuse?



DEMOGRAPHICS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY – THEMES: GENDER RELATIONS; CHILDREN AND YOUTH; SENIORS; 2-SPIRITED

TARP I highlighted particular groupings and their relationships both within and outside the community. We asked people to comment on the state of those relationships and heard much of the same commentary as was heard over a decade ago.

Gender Relations – Abusive relationships fuelled by alcohol and drug abuse were seen as a big problem. Participants spoke about the importance of tradition in creating the proper balance, where men and women walked side by side, sharing roles and responsibilities. People emphasized the need to treat each other with respect, to care for each other and build each other up, not pull each other down.

“We have all these beautiful organizations that help our sisters. We don’t have anything for our men.”

“The grandmothers are coming back—we need that not just for the women, we also need it for the men.”

Participants pointed out that gender balance also needs to be reflected in services and supports. Specific examples raised included a need for:

- Men’s healing groups to create safe spaces for men to share, learn, and be present with other Indigenous men in the community,
- Men’s parenting supports for fathers, uncles, and grandfathers,
- For women fleeing domestic violence, safe spaces that are low-barrier, have Indigenous culture and staff, and have a harm-reduction approach to service,
- Addictions services such as detoxification programs and substance misuse help centres, and
- Recognition of and accountability to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) and the Calls to Action.

“For a city the size of Toronto, in the same city they’re building all those condos, there’s two places for detox for women in this huge city. It’s just two detoxes for women. And that is so ridiculous—my

God! When someone wants to detox, they want to detox then and there, and they don't want to wait six weeks."

Children and Youth – Issues of poverty, housing instability, and food insecurity were very strongly affirmed as the top issues. Concerns were voiced about mental health, isolation, and suicidal ideation. The school system was especially concerning. The success factors were the presence of positive and supportive educational experiences, access to Indigenous culture and language, life-skills programs, and opportunities for healing programs geared for young people.

Seniors – The topic of seniors was approached with love and respect. People spoke of the need to increase seniors' supports, specifically accessible housing, health care, transportation, and services addressing the social needs of seniors. Culturally safe assisted-living services with housing options need to be increased; right now, they are very limited and over time the need will only grow larger. More than anything else, people expressed that loneliness and isolation were often profound and that Indigenous culture can offer so much because of its collective nature and its honouring of Elders. It was often stated that, typically, senior housing living spaces are small and not conducive to the collective nature of Indigenous family life.

2-Spirited – Discrimination and bias against 2-Spirited people were identified as significant and unrelenting. There is still more need for greater education and understanding of 2-Spirited people, both by the general population and within the Indigenous community itself. In many cases, 2-Spirited people feel judged, unsafe, and excluded altogether. Because 2-Spirited people face the dual stigma of Indigeneity and queerness, they experience more barriers than the general Indigenous population. The urgent need for mental health supports has been well-documented. The Indigenous service sector is still seen as having more work to do if it is to be fully welcoming. Many 2-Spirited people shared that they used the non-Indigenous service sector because of a lack of response from their own community.

THE COMMUNITY VOICE, IN SUMMARY

Resilient, supportive, and proud as the community is, the challenges that existed a decade ago persist today. In many ways things seem worse, with the gains overshadowed by structural issues that keep poor Indigenous people from enjoying their lives. Notwithstanding hard reality, some things can be done to elevate the status of the community towards that 'higher ground' aspired to by the title of this report.

Key actions identified by the community are as follows.

- a) Culture
 - Increase the presence of Indigenous cultural identity across the city through the telling of our stories, which will promote Torontonians' understanding of our community and open doorways for new and better relations with our non-Indigenous neighbours.
 - Carry culture, language, and history and understand our ways of knowing, seeing, being, and doing so that they are passed down through the generations.
 - Improve visibility of and access to the strong and vibrant Indigenous arts and cultural community.
 - Ensure a strong cultural base of Indigenous agencies, with respectful relationships across the diversity of nations and identities that make up the Indigenous community of Toronto.
- b) Housing
 - Increase affordable housing options across the broad spectrum of needs.

- Consult the homeless and housing-insecure community using practices that meet them where they are, employ harm-reduction models of service, and understand what self-determined supports they need.
- c) Education
- Provide access to education and training opportunities that will prepare people for the jobs of the future.
 - Educate the next generation on colonial history, truth, and cultural awareness through the school curriculum.
- d) Employment
- Help members of the Indigenous community enter the workforce by removing barriers.
 - Honour, value, and prioritize individuals with relevant lived experiences when recruiting providers of the services needed in the community.
- e) Services and Supports
- Ensure that services are geographically accessible and are situated where people actually live.
 - Review service hours of operation to allow for access and accommodation for those who cannot manage a 9-to-5 appointment.
 - Create case-management positions within agencies to help people navigate an increasingly complex service system.
 - Invest more in building service quality and consistency.
 - Support people through service transitions that come from staff turnover and move those aging out of programs to other appropriate supports if they need them.
- f) Financial Stability
- Develop culturally safe and relevant financial services that are tailored to Indigenous communities' needs, with Indigenous staff, credit counselling, and sudden-wealth management services.
 - Make concerted efforts to eliminate systemic barriers that exclude the Indigenous community from participation in the economic life of Toronto.
- g) Justice and Police
- Ensure that members of the community are supported and have access to fair and affordable justice.
 - Work to develop more traditional restorative justice methods that focus on healing and community.
- h) Racism and Discrimination
- Help Torontonians to understand the Indigenous community, its history, and its experience of systemic racism, and to commit to doing better by learning directly from the community itself.
 - Help Torontonians know and understand that they are also Treaty people, which requires them to recognize the self-determined Indigenous community in all its manifestations and in all our relationships.
- i) Child Welfare
- Create consensus within the community on how child protection services are best delivered and determine who can best deliver prevention-related services.

j) Health and Wellness

- Ensure that members of the community have opportunity to heal in traditional ways, with access to land, culture, traditional teachers, language, healers, and Indigenous healthcare workers, as well as culturally-based family and parenting supports.
- Focus on wellness instead of illness, with more preventive services to keep the community healthy and prevent crises.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM THE TASSC LEADERSHIP

A key component of the project was to document the voice of Indigenous leadership as expressed through the TASSC board of directors, all of whom are executives of member agencies. Two non-member executive directors (of Anishnawbe Health Toronto and ENAGB^x) also participated. In all, 17 senior leaders discussed broad questions related to both the legacy of TARP I and considerations for planning and implementing policies and programs to alleviate poverty and promote prosperity as part of a Prosperity Action Plan.

Two TASSC member agencies excluded themselves and chose to develop their own projects.

Summary of Conversations about TARP I

With all considerations, since 2011 the Indigenous community has made great strides in its development. They welcomed the present inquiry and thought it timely in light of the rapid urbanization happening and the opportunities afforded through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Leadership felt that not only had they made progress in service expansion and service quality, they noted that they had also increased the community's equity through purchasing and developing real property. It is not surprising that land ownership is critically important in the Indigenous context. They strongly agreed that while there has been good development, it has not kept pace with both the growing population and the intensity and complexity of the community's present needs.

Assuming increased community control over its services was recognized as highly important in ensuring the existence of the community itself. Leaders were proud of this.

Our inquiry was timely. Since 2011 the Indigenous community has changed so much and the membership of 11 agencies within TASSC has grown to 18. Although accurate population numbers seem up for debate, all those surveyed spoke of a sense of increased community member numbers and service demands. Some felt discouraged in even keeping their heads just above water and welcomed the Prosperity Action Plan, deeming it not just appropriate and timely but appreciating its emphasis on action.

Many spoke not only of capital and service growth, but also of the advancement of Indigenous culture, especially spiritually and ceremonially. They felt the cultural area has assumed even greater importance and that people are now more aware of this. They also welcomed the increased inclusiveness, apparent through 2-Spirited, Inuit, and Métis dedicated service agencies.

Commenting on recent coordinated TASSC activity, in response to the COVID pandemic, one participant said,

^x Eshkiniigjik Naandwechigegamig ("A Place for Healing Our Youth") Aabiish Gaa Binjibaaying ("Where Did We Come From?")

“Agencies are less siloed, with greater coordination. Still, lots of improvement can be made and we need to make sure we continue to nourish this cooperation.”

Another stated that there are more opportunities for Indigenous people today compared to 10 years ago, with the creation of new agencies and with the expansion of the breadth and depth of services they offer.

However, it was often mentioned that the conditions of the most marginalized, the homeless, and those in the grip of addictions and cycles of violence or with unhealed trauma remain pretty much the same, with some saying it is worse than in 2011.

Leaders spoke about the civic space inhabited by the Indigenous community. Historically, Toronto has been challenged in recognizing the uniqueness of the Indigenous community, which has either been rolled into a broad category of equity-seeking groups or ignored altogether. Leaders felt that in the decade since TARP I, gains have been made in furthering an understanding that the Indigenous community is not simply equity-seeking but seeking that equity through a self-determined process—more than that, that it has a constitutional right to seek its own relationship with Canada at every level of government.

Leadership thought that the greatest impact of the 2011 report was that it served to “stake” the community and, in doing so, helped establish its identity within the urban environment. Toronto has a very diverse expression of Indigenous life, and TARP I helped pull it all together. The Indigenous community got a better sense of itself as a collective, and Torontonians started to change their own understanding of their Indigenous neighbours.

One added that the TARP I agenda had been community-driven and the report structured and articulated through an Indigenous community lens. Another said,

“The publishing of TARP made the issues faced by the Indigenous community real and gave TASSC authority.”

Many agreed that,

“The greatest TARP-related achievement is the establishment of TASSC member relationships.”

TARP I was seen as a catalyst in rebranding and revitalizing the Indigenous service community. All agreed that the impact of TARP I had been very significant. Although there are other factors and dynamics that can explain the growth and development of the community, all agreed that TARP I had been instrumental in creating the community service system we have today.

However, the existence of pervasive and structural poverty experienced disproportionately by Indigenous people was alluded to consistently by TASSC leadership. Poverty is the common denominator across the service spectrum and was seen as coinciding with addictions, family violence, mental health issues, child removal, and homelessness. Leaders were clear that their clients’ financial distress was something they all had in common.

“We are still experiencing the same issues as 10 years ago. Many of the challenges outlined in TARP are still present and pressing today.”

If one single experience is significant in keeping people down, housing stress and distress were cited most often as the biggest risk factors impacting the welfare of their clients. Indigenous people are especially at risk in Toronto,

which has one of the hottest real estate markets in the country. This is true for those considered homeless, but it is also true for all Indigenous people in every economic category, except the most privileged.

Some cited the quality of relations between the Indigenous sector and the rest of Toronto.

“Why are Indigenous services always the ‘guests’ in other service hubs?”

This comment succinctly illustrates that relations between the Indigenous community and the rest of Toronto are still in a beginning stage. Although TARP I was an effort to build better relations between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous, that is still a work in progress.

“The model of inviting Indigenous stakeholders or community to participate in consultations, focus groups, steering committees, etc. needs to stop and to give the funding envelope over to the Indigenous community.”

Many spoke of reconciliation. People agreed that, at its core, this meant the recalibration of relationships, especially with decision-making and with resource allocation. Some expressed a cynicism regarding the power distribution dynamic and whether it is truly open to change.

One observed that a capacity to write proposals and mount programs is considered instead of whether the programs are appropriate and who can best provide them.

“...funding is going to the agencies with capacity versus the direction of the community. This fuels cycles of haves and have-nots, as larger agencies with more Western mandates are receiving greater shares of funding over emerging Indigenous agencies.”

A community member spoke of the need for better succession planning to ensure leadership is always fresh and available to meet future challenges. Another told of the difficulties in attracting and keeping Indigenous staff.

Racism came up often and was deemed to be intransigent and pervasive. One concluded,

“Instead of Indigenous agencies and services trying to work within the Western system, there has to be a greater recognition of them working within the Indigenous system.”

Overall, what gets in the way of progress is a combination of people’s overwhelming needs flowing from historical and current inequities. The Indigenous system struggles to meet needs and deal with conditions and personal situations that are complex and not easy to address one-to-one due to their systemic nature.

Many felt that mainstream systems also remain reluctant to let go of control or influence, especially regarding resource allocation. Some spoke of the public’s desensitization to the issues in addition to outright racism and how that works to create a sense that Indigenous problems are normal and tolerable.

“I often drive by those folks sleeping on grates for warmth on University Avenue. I was shocked at first—now I hardly look. This is what happens.”

On the question of whether their organizations implemented any of TARP I’s recommendations, leaders responded both “Yes” and “No.” Yes insofar as TARP I provided the impetus for their work and helped them clarify the issues. It was a guidepost that they could use as a reference in conversations with funders and stakeholders. Some said it was a huge help in getting those with power to pay more attention to their agencies and their unique issues.

“I used the full report as an advocacy piece to funders. I asked them if they had a response for any of the report’s recommendations.”

While TARP I was a big influencer, most did not implement its recommendations as specifically written in the report itself. Rather, the agencies used the report as a resource in their toolbox and raised it as needed in multiple ways.

Some were critical of TARP I for not going far enough or deep enough and questioned how useful it has really been.

“TARP didn’t go deep enough into the trenches—too-broad strokes. It did get increased attention from parties but didn’t give enough depth of information to continue the conversation.”

When the leadership was asked to reflect on what has worked well for their organizations since the publication of TARP I, they all expressed pride in their cultural base and Indigenous lens.

“Having more Elders and Traditional Healers present to assist and support clients through their service journey has greatly improved outcomes.”

They were not just speaking about ceremony, but also about the full integration of culture into all aspects of programming. On-the-land programs were especially valued as an integral part of programming. Leaders’ comments resoundingly emphasized the obligation to honour the people you work with by honouring where they come from and who they are, and that meant respecting Indigenous diversity and seeing its strength but also its challenges.

SUMMARY OF AGENCY LEADERSHIP CONVERSATIONS ON PROSPERITY

Leadership was adamantly clear about the conditions in which far too many Indigenous people live. At every stage in life, poverty is a colonial legacy that is very much evident in urban Canada, including Toronto. The Indigenous population in Toronto, which is already considered by many to be the “child poverty capital of Canada,” is at the bottom percentile of all economic measures.

“Poverty remains unrelenting even for the Indigenous middle class as the cost of living in the city continues to increase amid rising anxieties and the unaddressed traumas of colonization.”

TASSC leaders are responsible for agencies that provide support to the most vulnerable and economically stressed, including people without housing. One said,

“Poverty causes poor outcomes and creates barriers to prevent escape. It does not let go, with few exceptions, and only through great effort can it be overcome. Too many in the Indigenous community are still caught in the poverty bubble.”

Many spoke of the impact of poverty on self-worth and identity. They felt that chronic financial distress works to create an “expectation of nothing” that eventually becomes a self-fulfilling reality. One felt that the issues of financial stress and distress were experienced by all, including the middle class. They also said,

“The Indigenous middle class is underserved because the majority of services are targeting the high-need vulnerable community living in poverty. The social services available aren’t necessarily perceived as being for them.”

Housing repeatedly came up in conversation. In Toronto, the world is divided between those housed properly and affordably and those who are not. Leadership was clear that, when looking at the harm created through the reality of being poor, this is the greatest issue.

Following housing as the number one issue was access to Indigenous services and their capacity to meet service needs. The Indigenous community has increasingly been dislocated from its traditional neighbourhood in the city’s central core and is now dispersed throughout the Greater Toronto Area. Leadership stated that increased resources would help their agencies to provide services closer to where people lived and enhance the services’ capacity to meet their changing needs.

Many conversations were far-ranging and encompassing the many impacts that poverty can have on people. Mental health, addictions, family violence, and food insecurity were all highlighted.

Prosperity, as seen through the Indigenous lens described earlier, is elusive. Chronic stress and distress, a reliance by many on payday loans and other predatory financial services, or simply doing without were all cited as being more commonly experienced now for the people they served. Notwithstanding this bleak picture, shared by most, all felt that things could be done to alleviate the stresses of poverty but, more importantly, to help people do better with what small income they have and, even *more* importantly, to help them create greater prosperity.

In addition to the obvious need for more accessible and affordable housing, many highlighted job-readiness training, financial literacy programs, and banking services that would help prevent the obvious exploitation by unscrupulous lenders and programs that treat clients as people whose health is tied to their economic state.

TASSC leaders offered a number of ideas to assist the people they serve in moving from surviving to thriving. The strongest and first was to recognize that as a community TASSC needs to take responsibility for improving the financial health of its community. This means taking a strong and public stance on poverty and becoming more vocal to ensure that the Indigenous voice is heard.

“Poverty-alleviation efforts are not sufficient to create long-term improved outcomes for individuals experiencing poverty. We need to make sure to not be caught in the cycle of only providing band-aid solutions, we need to be able to get upstream to the root causes.”

This means partnering with allies in government, in business, and in the charitable sector to generate actions that are beyond “food hampers” and lead to a more dignified and long-lasting solution. Most stated bluntly that a guaranteed income for all Canadians is the ultimate answer, but that in the interim a lot could be accomplished if all Toronto works together on the issues.

COMMUNITY SERVICES IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Chapter 1 of this report provided a brief review of the development of the Indigenous service system over the decade post-TARP I, shining a positive light on this narrative. But as we consulted with the people served, we came to understand that TASSC agencies are challenged in achieving the expectations of the community as to the quality (respectful, responsive, cultural, effective) and quantity (meeting the needs) of services.

The community voice was unanimous in appreciating the work of TASSC member agencies. People reaffirmed their preference for using services that are accountable to them, that understand them, that are Indigenous-led and Indigenous-staffed, that see them through an Indigenous heart and as a whole person, and that go the extra mile.

This report was never meant to evaluate any specific agency, and it does not. Using TARP I as a beginning point, our mandate was to look at the Indigenous service system, which is of collective concern to TASSC, and to suggest actions that would lead to improvement in the client experience going forward.

The themes from our community conversations revealed specific areas that TASSC could and likely should explore and develop. This requires a structure and a process.

The following are actionable items for TASSC's consideration. The community participated with the understanding that TASSC is responsible for service planning and the facilitation of problem-solving among its members and within the broader community.

Short-Term Work on Service Improvement

- TASSC should convene special forums with TASSC member agencies and other Indigenous providers to discuss how to collectively address the service issues raised in the report.
- The forums should be structured as leadership forums but should include service users and providers; they could be conducted using Indigenous protocols and ways of problem solving.
- The focus of the forums should be on the key issues^{xi} raised in the consultations:
 - **Service quality and accessibility**
 - **Housing**
 - **Child and family services, including child protection**
- The purpose of the forums will be to create both a structure and a process that fundamentally addresses these issues.
- Action plans are the key deliverables.

Long-Term Work on Service Improvement

Long term, TASSC should institute a process of continuous improvement. The last decade saw tremendous growth of the Indigenous service sector, in both its size and scope. The next decade may be growth-oriented as well, but based on what the community voices told us, TASSC will need to increasingly consider accessibility, quality, and overlapping service mandates.

^{xi} A fourth forum topic, that of financial health and prosperity, is identified in Chapter 3 of the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan.

Child welfare will need attention as the community expressed strong negative feelings about their experiences both in the past and today. The Indigenous service model, in its current application, does not enjoy wide support. Ten years after TARP I, child and family services are provided by many more agencies. Communication and collaboration among them need to be improved. We may be at a critical moment since the relations that exist among stakeholders have not generated solutions for the colonial legacy of child removal. The child welfare community is simply not working together—and it should. Moreover, now that Indigenous Services Canada has become a major funder, the context since TARP I has changed significantly, making matters even more urgent.

The topic of housing was so dominant in our consultations that a housing emergency might be declared. The Indigenous housing providers have not been able to keep pace, and the problems are thought to be worse. This demands activism and Indigenous agency collaboration with new partners, especially the private sector, as elaborated in the “Prosperity” chapter of this plan. Drawing these parties together could be sparked by a forum that begins the discussion where *Meeting in the Middle* (2018) leaves off.

The suggested forum would be the beginning, and as this report outlines, the measure of the success of all this effort will be the people standing and declaring their satisfaction that things are moving forward. The forum(s) will generate a structure for action and will result in TASSC sub-committees and mandates to deliver solutions.

Agencies will need to approach this with an attitude of accommodation, collaboration, and unity. TASSC needs to find long-term resources to do its job, which is to help its members meet their objectives of improving the system for themselves, for the Indigenous sector, and most importantly, for the people they serve.



Chapter 3

To Higher Ground

TORONTO INDIGENOUS PROSPERITY ACTION PLAN

Prosperity means different things to different people. The Western concept of prosperity is a state of success, especially financial or material success. It's "rising to the top" (no matter how you get there) and is not often seen beyond the simple notion of personal accumulation of resources, especially material resources.

Prosperity is the capacity to maintain that state of high materiality over time, ideally over generations. It's a word closely associated with individual gain, but many use it to describe the economic state of a community or nation. In any case, it is most often defined narrowly, in a way that fails to tell the whole story, at least not the Indigenous one.

The following section describes concepts of prosperity as seen through Indigenous eyes. Of course, there are many understandings and related teachings from different Indigenous cultures. What is described here comes from Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples as articulated in teachings, treaties, and more recent studies.

PROSPERITY AS AN INDIGENOUS CONSTRUCT

The Anishinaabe definition of prosperity is *Mino bimaadiziwin*, meaning "good life." It is based on traditional teachings and goes beyond the absence of poverty. Prosperity includes connection to and harmonious relations within yourself, your family, your community, and the land. It is holistic in orientation, encompassing mind, body, and spirit. It stresses the Seven Grandfather Teachings of Humility, Bravery, Honesty, Truth, Respect, Love, and Wisdom.

Mino bimaadiziwin is underscored by collective responsibilities and reciprocity. It requires that people have the resources and the capacity to fulfill obligations and to contribute to the collective. In turn, the collective must support people in their aspirations and obligations toward *Mino bimaadiziwin*. It's a balance of individual needs and collective responsibilities—a balanced state of relations that promotes individual and collective well-being.

The Haudenosaunee add a critical dimension and speak of *Ganohonyohk* (giving thanks), which enhances the collective meaning and purpose of *Mino bimaadiziwin*. *Ganohonyohk* requires acknowledgement, recognition, and gratitude for all that our first Mother provides us to live in abundance. It teaches us to understand inter-relationality and the correlation between all living things and to be good caretakers of the land in a manner that is responsible and considers the generations yet to come. Part of this giving thanks is observing that we are part of a greater ecosystem that works in harmony and that we have a role and responsibility to our community, clan, nation, and all living things. It is our unique relationship that we have with this land that allows for sustenance and sustainability.

We are the land. The land provides us with food, medicine, clothing, housing, culture, connection, and ceremony. It gives us a sense of belonging and tells us where we are from and where we are going.

Ganohonyohk is not about selfish pursuits; it's about going forward together. It brings the natural world—the swimmers, the four-legged, the winged ones and all of creation—into the equation. It helps us evaluate progress in the broadest sense in this interconnected world.

The Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan lens incorporates these multiple perspectives. It is not just about deficits, it's about strength and about the quality of life. It aspires toward *Mino bimaadiziwin* and is guided by the values of *Ganohonyohk*, the collective and interconnectedness of life.

RECONCILIATION AND PROSPERITY

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) spoke of prosperity in Section 92 of its Calls to Action. The TRC called upon the corporate sector in Canada to:

- Adopt the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)* as a reconciliation framework, and
- Apply its principles, norms, and standards to corporate policy and core operational activities involving Indigenous peoples and their lands and resources.

The Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan has been morally compelled to address TRC Call to Action #92^{xii}. Those who share these “marching orders” seek actionable opportunities to get meaningfully involved. This report provides that opportunity.

Reading UNDRIP shows that the economic health and welfare of Indigenous peoples is a right expressed throughout the document. It does this both directly and indirectly and is consistent with social justice frameworks including anti-racism and Indigenous sovereignty perspectives. Treaties and relationships are embedded and part of Canada’s constitution, establishing the relationships and guiding reconciliation.²⁷

In reference to “corporate policies and operational activities,” it’s clear that civil society, business, government, and the charitable sector are expected to not only be helpful but to wholeheartedly participate in the reconciliation process. The Ally Table, described later in this report, a core part of this project, is a clear example of the means by which such lofty aspirations can be actualized.

Prosperity, as elaborated above, is remarkably congruent with the One Dish One Spoon Covenant (Wampum) that speaks of relations between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee. The covenant draws all stakeholders into a reciprocal dynamic where sharing and caring are the dominant themes. Those who wish to honour treaties in their relations would do well to examine the possibilities that exist under such a noble contract. This is often fittingly summarized in the phrase “We are all Treaty people”, used by many progressives. It is a value that underscores the majority of themes in this report.

LESSONS LEARNED

TARP I is universally felt to have moved the Indigenous agenda forward and created a stronger sense of community. It provided a heightened awareness of, and actions on, Indigenous matters from non-Indigenous stakeholders, stimulated rapid Indigenous service development, and aided infrastructure and related capital investments.

TARP I was not successful in fully developing the capacity to get ahead of the perpetual crises experienced by the most at-risk and economically stressed community members. It did not facilitate cooperative and collaborative service relations among TASSC members or create an ongoing and dynamic service planning process. TARP I was not successful in developing its own agenda and ensuring its adoption within all stakeholder groups.

^{xii} Call to Action #92: Commit to meaningful consultation, building respectful relationships and obtaining the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous peoples before proceeding with economic development projects.

There exists a chronically economically stressed segment of the Indigenous community with the “expectation of nothing,” as well as a segment that is chronically financially challenged who are managing but are significantly stressed.

There exists little or no help within the possible spectrum of financial services and supports that specifically addresses the financial condition of the community. TASSC member agencies provide few services related to financial wellness beyond poverty alleviation and some basic financial literacy initiatives that have difficulty engaging the community.

Housing is a fundamental right and indicator of financial wellness, and the housing deficit is an increasing issue with no signs of abatement. The housing issue cuts across all segments of the Indigenous community and Indigenous housing providers cannot keep pace.

Perhaps unique to the Indigenous community is the extent to which various existing social benefits are not used. Receiving the Federal Child Benefit, for example, requires filing your taxes. Historically, this has been one area where Indigenous people have been under involved, particularly for those at the lower end of the economic scale. One consequence is that if a family in poverty does not file a tax return, it could lose thousands of dollars of benefits to which they are entitled.

Similarly, programs to help children with special needs, which should be oversubscribed to by Indigenous people, instead are undersubscribed, a fact that can be attributed to a distrust of medical practitioners, whose diagnosis is required before supports are provided. The historic and current institutional trauma experienced by the community has resulted in many families doing without certain social benefits to avoid the risk of having a child welfare officer knock on the door, opening a process of scrutiny or investigation they fear won't end well.

Indigenous people in Toronto may also be eligible for financial payouts and compensations related to traumas they experienced as children in residential schools, Indian day schools and during the Sixties Scoop, as determined by the results of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal and litigation won on their behalf. This represents a huge amount of money that not all who are entitled to will ever get. Urban Indigenous communities have a disproportionate number of residents who were “scooped” or who are entitled to different compensation agreements. Southern Ontario was favoured by Western child welfare agencies as an ideal place to adopt children into who came from the north and west. Regarding this issue, there is compensation available from two areas of litigation, but it is unknown how many eligible adoptees will actually apply for it.

THE TORONTO PROSPERITY ALLY TABLE

Early in the project, allies were selected from various constituencies: the government (federal, provincial, and municipal) and the philanthropic and private sectors. All members expressed a desire to do more and to take direction from the Indigenous community. Different governance factors, timelines, and accountabilities among these allies may need to be factored into the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan.

The Toronto Prosperity Ally Table had the following terms of reference:

- To inform the development of the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan and build commitment to its implementation among table members and others,
- To be informed about the status of the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan and the urban Indigenous community,

- To actively participate with collaborators in developing the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan,
- To become allies and activators of the Action Plan, and
- To conclude with concrete commitments from table members that align with the Action Plan's priorities. The table will seek out synergies, build networks among the urban Indigenous community and table members, and use their influence and power for the advancement of the Action Plan.

The group met several times to discuss the purpose of the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan and potential roles they could play. Two Indigenous advisors, Simon Brascoupe of Carleton University, the principal author of *The Shared Path*, and Sylvia Maracle, former Executive Director of the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, joined these meetings to share reflections and provide insights.

CURRENT ALLY ENGAGEMENT

All three levels of government are currently engaged with Toronto Indigenous agencies on a range of initiatives. Significant investment was made in response to the pandemic, though much work had already been underway in policy and program development.

As housing has emerged as a critical prosperity issue, a close look reveals that all three levels of government have roles in ensuring that affordable housing is built and maintained for Indigenous people. This is addressed in the Action Plan below.

The city has just approved a Reconciliation Action Plan that includes initiatives to support entrepreneurship, procurement from Indigenous businesses/suppliers, and forums for Indigenous businesses. The city is also starting work on Indigenous economic development in Toronto's ravines, looking first at opportunities to layer in Indigenous business and organizational opportunities, seeking involvement from Indigenous earth workers/land stewards to avoid contracting out to large non-Indigenous businesses when possible.

Ontario's provincial government has continued to fund some Indigenous agencies for specific support programs and recently announced an Indigenous housing initiative. The federal government is currently refreshing its Urban Indigenous Strategy to reflect post-pandemic priorities.

The foundations representing the philanthropic sector had a variety of existing commitments, some of which were specific to Toronto and others that target other jurisdictions. These organizations can (and do) play several roles. Several of the organizations currently invest some of their endowment funds in an Indigenous investment firm and such investing is one way to support Indigenous-led initiatives. The Community Foundations of Canada also has grants through the Indigenous Peoples Resilience Fund, an Indigenous-led effort to respond to urgent community needs while taking a long-term view on building community resilience. Philanthropic organizations also have an influence on other funders and community players. They can play a valuable role in amplifying the community voice and bringing others to the table.

Two types of private-sector allies have come forward: the financial sector and property developers.

In summary, allies were enthusiastic about the project and their potential role within it. They recognized that the Indigenous community would determine the direction of the work and they were respectful of this being Indigenous-led. One thing they agreed on was that actions speak louder than words. They looked forward to continuing and expanding a collaborative process to demonstrate what can be done when people work together.

COMMITMENTS AND ACTIONS

The lessons from past efforts, research about Indigenous financial wellness, and the voice of the community all call for the following commitments and actions from key stakeholders.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The first commitment is to a set of principles to guide the implementation of the Action Plan. These are taken from the research and community consultations and apply across multiple initiatives:

- ***Reconciliation should underscore all actions toward improving Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations within Toronto.***
- ***The work should also be guided by the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.***
- ***Indigenous self-determination should be promoted through investment in Indigenous-controlled and delivered services.***
- ***The capacity for non-Indigenous stakeholders to know and understand the experience of Indigenous people should be supported, developed, and enhanced.***
- ***The Indigenous voice must be sought and engaged with at all levels of civic life.***
- ***Collaborative and tangible actions that support financial wellness must be created.***
- ***An ongoing and inclusive (government, private, and charitable sector) dialogue must be engaged in that systematically addresses structural impediments to a prosperous life for Indigenous Toronto.***
- ***All program components necessary to achieve effective impact must be funded at the appropriate levels and within realistic time frames.***

ACTIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS (ALL LEVELS)

Each level of government has specific relevant responsibilities, but they also need to work together for most prosperity initiatives to be successful. The following commitments are requested of governments:

- Create an integrated action plan from all levels that delineates responsibilities, authorities, and actions to achieve Indigenous prosperity.
- Reinforce “housing first” as a prerequisite to all other interventions.
- Support the creation of housing options that are stable, sustainable, accessible, and affordable.
- Create Indigenous programs, policies, and processes that are co-developed and strength-based to support and nurture urban communities generally and Toronto’s specifically.
- The federal government must complete a renewed Urban Indigenous Strategy and dedicate funding for Indigenous urban housing and social programming, with priority emphasis on cities with large urban Indigenous populations, using a locally determined approach with coalitions like TASSC.
- The provincial government must commit to a cross-government Indigenous strategy that addresses the income, employment, housing, and health needs of the urban Indigenous population. Additionally, it must take part in planning, discussions, and the building of effective relationships.
- The City of Toronto needs to implement its Reconciliation Action Plan.
- The City of Toronto must commit to a Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan implementation structure with TASSC.

ACTIONS FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The private sector includes a range of individuals and institutions, some that have been involved in the project and some that will need to be engaged during the implementation phase. The following commitments are needed from members of the private sector:

- Develop and enhance institutional capacity to know and understand the experiences of Indigenous communities and people, and to treat those Indigenous clients respectfully at every interface.
- Support, resource, and collaborate on Indigenous housing initiatives.
- Ensure that all Indigenous Torontonians have access to information about their financial rights and entitlements.
- Focus on ensuring the appropriate financial resources are understood for those with special needs in regard to costs required to ameliorate those needs.
- Ensure that Indigenous people access what is owed to them through legal challenges and Human Rights Tribunals.
- In collaboration with TASSC members, develop and implement anti-poverty and prosperity-related programs.
- Commit to a Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan implementation structure with TASSC.
- Fund and sponsor Indigenous community initiatives.

ACTIONS FOR THE PHILANTHROPIC SECTOR

The philanthropic organizations that have participated in the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan have key roles to play within their own sector and in collaboration with other sectors. The following commitments are needed from members of the charitable sector:

- Develop and enhance institutional capacity to know and understand the experience of Indigenous peoples.
- Establish prosperity as the objective in relations with the Indigenous community.
- Invest a portion of endowment funds in Indigenous social impact projects.
- Collaborate with other funders to ensure adequate support for all the necessary program components needed for effective impact.
- Commit to a Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan implementation structure with TASSC.
- Build relationships with Indigenous leaders and agencies.
- Set annual targets to increase funding allocations for Indigenous initiatives.

ACTIONS FOR TASSC

TASSC is a key collective body for the Indigenous community in Toronto and, as such, needs to represent the Indigenous community in the implementation of the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan. The following commitments are needed from TASSC:

- Formally approve the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan.
- Create and support a Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan implementation structure by creating a space for the project at the board and staff levels.

- Consider the creation of a First Nation, Inuit, and Métis comprehensive community plan.
- Promote the provision of financial literacy services among agency members.
- Staff and resource the Action Plan as articulated in this report.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan includes initiatives that can begin to be implemented almost immediately, others that will take months to plan and/or find funding for, and some that will take longer to achieve. This implementation plan assigns the proposed Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan initiatives to three phases: short, medium, and long-term actions.

To ensure successful implementation, the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan needs a project management structure with governance and accountability mechanisms. The following is proposed for consideration by TASSC and the allies who were assembled during the project.

- TASSC Ally Table:
 - Membership should include one or more members of each of the three sectors of the Ally Table: government (federal, provincial, and municipal), philanthropists, and the private sector,
 - Terms of reference should include planning and approval of guiding principles, a declaration of collective commitment, and annual implementation plans and reporting mechanisms, and
 - The Table should continue to co-develop an Urban Indigenous Strategy.
- TASSC Steering Committee:
 - Membership should be made up of TASSC employees, contractors, and council members who will have direct responsibility and oversight for the work, and
 - The Steering Committee should continue to co-develop an Urban Indigenous Strategy.
- Collective Commitment Declaration:
 - Each organization should commit formally to working with TASSC members and affiliates to implement the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan,
 - Commit to join either the TASSC Ally Table or the TASSC Steering Committee, and
 - Implement the Guiding Principles.
- Project Management Resources:
 - TASSC staff or consultants must be resourced to implement the annual work plans.
- Annual Work Plans:
 - These must include initiatives, working groups, roles and responsibilities, timelines, and reporting and evaluation plans.

SHORT-TERM INITIATIVES

The following prosperity initiatives can begin to be implemented immediately; some resources and delivery structures are already available.

Implementation Structures:

- Create the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan implementation structure with allies and TASSC members.

- Complete the Collective Commitment Declaration among the members and agree to the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan Principles.
- Create an integrated action plan for all levels that assigns responsibilities, authorities, and actions for Indigenous prosperity.
- Plan a fourth special forum^{xiii} to include leadership, service users, providers, funders, and all who have a stake in the health and welfare of the community to address **financial health and prosperity**.

Build Community Financial Capacity:

- Assemble the current Indigenous financial literacy resources from various sources and develop a plan to provide these services to the clients of all TASSC member agencies.
- Ensure that all Indigenous Torontonians are informed about their financial rights and entitlements.
- Focus on helping those with special needs to understand what financial resources are available to them to ameliorate those needs.
- Ensure that all Indigenous people get all that is owed to them through legal challenges and Human Rights Tribunals.
- Financial literacy and access to benefits have been identified as a need for some Indigenous residents of Toronto, particularly by the most impoverished or “distressed”. Increasing their financial literacy would be of great benefit because many are missing out on significant financial resources because they do not know what social or tax benefits they qualify for or how to claim them. It became clear as this project proceeded that some banks already have financial literacy programs designed for Indigenous people, but these do not seem to be widely available or delivered through Toronto’s Indigenous agencies. The City Poverty Reduction Strategy Office is working with Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) on financial literacy content that might be leveraged in the Action Plan. The Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada has one of the largest volunteer tax programs in Canada.
- Access to basic banking and credit is also essential for financial prosperity, and discussions have included the need for a financial institution with a mission to serve the Indigenous community.

Housing:

- Facilitate federal/provincial/municipal discussion to access the Rapid Housing Initiative funds for the city’s Indigenous housing commitments.
- The federal Rapid Housing Initiative has kick-started a new phase of affordable housing construction. This initiative is expected to continue to provide funds that can be factored into the Toronto Indigenous Prosperity Action Plan.
- The city has designated approval for 5,000 units of affordable housing for Indigenous residents but needs the funds to fulfill this promise.

MEDIUM-TERM INITIATIVES

- Reinforce “housing first” as a prerequisite to all other interventions.

^{xiii} Three special forums were recommended as part of the Community Services Improvement Plan in Chapter 2.

- Support the creation of housing options that are stable, sustainable, accessible, and affordable, including ownership.
- Create the wrap-around services that Indigenous supportive housing residents need.
- The appointment of a lead such as the Toronto Indigenous Community Advisory Board (TICAB) of TASSC agencies for the potential management of Indigenous housing investments, which might include a continuum of housing services and needs, ranging from homeless shelters to affordable rentals to home ownership.
- Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) has a family-violence prevention program that builds shelters. Recently, the program began considering building shelters off-reserve, and they could support TASSC in preparing a proposal to address some needs for shelter/transitional housing.

LONG-TERM INITIATIVES

- Support the development of Indigenous-led institutional capacity to promote and strengthen financial wellness and develop prosperity within the Toronto Indigenous community.

LOOKING TWICE, LOOKING FORWARD: A REFLECTIVE MOMENT

Poverty is a symptom of oppression. We have over 400 years of oppressive policies and systemic and systematic history and contemporary reality to contend with; and yet we are here. We are here and resilient as ever, finding our way despite that adversity. This plan was created to move, motivate, inspire, and bring light to key issues and opportunities that, should we be bold enough to try, can act as a catalyst for a better tomorrow.

The spark for this plan was born of the desire to come together, think big, and do what so many other plans sometimes don't: ACT. Do something. Do better. Build back what was broken and believe in the impossible.

Lindsay Kretchmer, Executive Director, TASSC

APPENDICES:

REFERENCE POINTS

In addition to substantive community consultation, this report draws upon a number of studies done by others that document the conditions of Indigenous people and point to actions that could result in systemic change.

- *The Toronto Aboriginal Research Project Final Report*, TASSA (2011), provided a profile, an analysis, and a record of the community and its aspirations.
- *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), provided a moral framework as a foundation for future actions.
- *Census Canada*, Statistics Canada (2016), provided demographic information on determinants of health and well-being.
- *Our Health Counts*, Urban Aboriginal Health Database Research Project (2016), provided demographics and analysis.
- *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, United Nations (2017), provided standards and obligations on Indigenous rights.
- *Ganohonyohk: Giving Thanks*, Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (2018), provided knowledge about prosperity from an Indigenous lens.
- *Meeting in the Middle – Engagement Strategy and Action Plan*, City of Toronto and TASSC (2018), provided the guiding example of Indigenous community and municipal collaboration to yield impact through action on housing.
- *The Shared Path: First Nations Financial Wellness*, Prosper Canada and AFOA Canada (2019), provided a template of high-level considerations in planning prosperity.
- *Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy Action Plan*, City of Toronto (2019), provided information and civic intent on prosperity.
- *Toronto's Vital Signs* (2021), Toronto Foundation (2021), provided hard data on poverty.

TASSC MEMBER AGENCIES

- 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations
- Aboriginal Labour Force Development Circle
- Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto
- Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts/Arts Indigenous
- Gabriel Dumont Non-Profit Homes
- Miziwe Biik Employment and Training
- Na Me Res (Native Men's Residence)
- Native Canadian Centre of Toronto
- Native Child and Family Services of Toronto – ceased TASSC membership and participation in this report development in January 2023
- Native Women's Resource Centre of Toronto
- Nishnawbe Homes
- Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy
- Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society
- Toronto and York Region Métis Council
- Toronto Council Fire Native Cultural Centre
- Toronto Inuit Association
- Urban Indigenous Education Centre
- Wigwamen Incorporated

COMMUNITY CIRCLES FACILITATION QUESTIONS

1. What are you most proud of as a member of the Indigenous community in Toronto?
 - a. What do we do best?
2. What is your vision of "Everyday Good Living" and a "Healthy Community"?
3. What are the things getting in the way of Everyday Good Living for you, your family, friends, or community?
 - a. What are some of the barriers you or your family and friends have come up against?
 - b. What needs to change to remove these types of barriers? What kind of systematic changes need to happen first?
4. What are your dreams and hopes for the future (culture, money, house, car, education, employment, family, health...)?
5. What do you need for your dreams and hopes to come true?

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