

A REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF THE MAJOR CHALLENGES AND
CONCERNS OF ABORIGINAL YOUTH IN CANADA

Prepared for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will review and analyze the major challenges facing Aboriginal youth in Canada as reflected in the community-based research conducted by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) Youth Perspectives division over the course of its research agenda.

¹ It will also highlight key concerns expressed by Aboriginal youth on cultural identity, education and justice issues, with the aim of synthesizing the perspective emanating from youth, and comparing their recommendations for change with those policy and program recommendations contained in the RCAP Final Report.

A previous synthesis produced for the Commission by Godin-Beers (1994), and appended to this paper, provided a consolidation of the recommendations found in the various community studies, as well as a concise summary of each community's input on the issues that formed the foci of the research agenda in the Youth Perspectives research. This paper will not replicate the work which has been done to date in terms of consolidation and summary, but will build on existing materials to highlight and discuss those specific recommendations that warrant consideration as guideposts to understanding the unique challenges that face Aboriginal youth in Canada. By contrasting the recommendations which came out of the youth studies with those from the other RCAP divisions, it will also be possible to discern the distinguishing features of a

¹ This study draws on completed Youth Perspectives community studies and a synthesis report produced by the Commission, as well as internal documents outlining the RCAP recommendations foreseen for the Final Report, namely: Lucille Bell, 1993 Youth Perspectives Report of Old Massett, November 1993; Angela Bishop, Metis Youth: Green Lake Saskatchewan, May 1994; Kevin Deer, Mohawks of Kahnawake Community Study: A Narrative of a Future Beyond Disunity, Revised, July 1994; Monique Godin-Beers, Youth Perspectives Community Studies: Synthesis Paper, August 1994; Chris Lafleur, Edmonton Youth Perspectives Project, November 1993; Brian Smith, White Dog Youth Case Study, February 1994; and, RCAP Final Report 'Summary of

youth culture among Aboriginal peoples -- and a differentiation from the perspective of existing Aboriginal leadership on issues such as institutional and program development, and on approaches to politics and change.

This summary and analysis will be driven by a set of values sympathetic to the perspective expressed by many of the participants in the RCAP Youth Perspectives research in the community studies and in the other forums. That is, the success of all potential measures to improve the situation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada is dependent upon the next generation of Indian, Inuit and Métis leaders; Aboriginal youth must give legitimacy to the measures being proposed or they will not be carried forward as lasting solutions to the problems facing Aboriginal peoples, and Aboriginal youth as a whole must possess the strength and knowledge necessary to lead their people in the battle against the monumental challenges which will continue to confront Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples for generations to come.

The first part of this paper will consist of a critical reading of the five community studies in light of the objectives stated above, and will seek to present an analysis through a dialogue and discussion of key points and recommendations which differ from general sets of recommendations on other issues that emerge from the studies themselves. The second section will summarize, compare and contrast the youth and RCAP recommendations in a practical sense, and analyze the implications of disparities between the two sets.

Recommendations' (As at June 23, 1995).

I. YOUTH PERSPECTIVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON CHALLENGES

Rather than presenting substantial research on the broad range of issues identified by RCAP as important for consideration in the community studies (employment, economic development, education, recreation, housing, health care, justice and cultural identity), each of the studies seemed to have a particular focus perhaps reflecting the major concern facing the community. The studies on the Mohawks of Kahnawake (cultural identity) and urban Métis in Edmonton (justice & policing) were single-issue studies concentrating on a particular problem. But even the studies on the Métis settlement in Green Lake, Saskatchewan as well as the study on the Ojibway in Whitedog, Ontario and Old Massett Village in British Columbia did demonstrate that, at the community level, there are overriding concerns and challenges which make each case unique.

The challenge for the Commission is to use each case as a tool to gain insight into a facet of the whole set of challenges facing Aboriginal peoples, to see those aspects of each case which transcend the local, and to evaluate the solutions proposed in each study in comparison with a general understanding of youth issues and the economic, political and social realities facing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians in their effort to confront these problems.

Education

Aboriginal youth spoke pointedly to the problem of welfare dependency as a contributing factor in the despondency prevalent in many communities. The youth were keenly aware of the roots of their seeming segregation from the rest of society with respect to jobs and

opportunity for advancement, and made an explicit linkage to the low level of educational attainment among Aboriginal youth as a whole.

Their recommendations on education thus focused on making schools relevant and accommodating so that more Aboriginal youth would continue to completion. Relevance, as defined by the youth, was not a function of skills or methodology so much as content in that Aboriginal youth almost universally argued for an increased Native cultural content to the curriculum and heightened sensitivity to the difficulty of bridging two cultures in the learning process.

Their attention was not only focused on institutional reforms; Aboriginal youth also recognize the importance of mentoring, emotional support and the creation of what in other communities is a 'culture of education' in which incentives, support networks and patterns of discipline and responsibility are oriented toward success in education. Aboriginal youth decried the lack of parental participation in the education of their own children as either role models or supporters. The youth realize that this was a difficult task for their own parents on the whole because of their own negative experiences with the educational system. Yet there was a distinct sense of resentment at the lack of determination on the part of the older generation to realize the implications of their own limitations as far as education goes.

Adding to the systemic and cultural problems which mediate against academic success, Aboriginal youth added their physical isolation from schools to the list of factors. The necessity of relocating to urban centres or other communities for schooling was identified as a major problem and obstacle preventing Aboriginal youth from entering the higher education system.

This last point of criticism does link the Aboriginal youth perspective to one of its own implicit recommendations. The youth perspective identifies the key problem and follows immediately with an identification of the solution to the sense of alienation and separation which prevents youth from being successful in education systems which are still dominated by a White value system. Aboriginal youth believe that the cultural gap that separates them from the education system must be bridged. The schools must accommodate their cultural values in some basic way, and they themselves must accommodate the values of the education system in a basic way as well. They were clear in recognizing that bilingualism necessary -- Aboriginal youth must speak English and their Native languages to satisfy the demands of both societies.

They also recognize that they are not being prepared well for this task well on either side; Aboriginal languages languish in many communities and seem to dominate nowhere, and their community primary schools do not adequately prepare youth in the English language to compete in non-Native educational environments. Aboriginal youth, if they are going to be successful in education, have a heavy burden of balancing the demands of both societies and they are demanding the basic tools they need.

Key Recommendations on Education

Aboriginal youth want federal funding for education be maintained, and increased with respect to new cultural programs.

Aboriginal youth want much greater representation of their Native cultures in school curriculum.

Aboriginal youth want a greater participation of community elders and leaders in the education of their young.

Community

Aboriginal youth provided insightful criticisms of the complacency and negativity which dominate life in many Aboriginal communities. They sense that an erosion of traditional cultural values has led to the collapse of a moral foundation to life in many of these communities, and that their people have responded to the extreme social, economic, political and cultural pressures put on them by withdrawing into a world of substance abuse and self-destruction. They lament the loss of pride and honor which seemed to have characterized their communities in a not so distant past, and despair at the contrast between the healthy and powerful lifestyles of their traditional ancestors in contrast with the sometimes desperate and always unsatisfying existence of life in most contemporary Native communities.

This sense is reflected in some very basic ways. Aboriginal youth see low self-esteem rooted in such things as the paucity and low quality of their physical surroundings including housing in Aboriginal communities. But by far the major concern of Aboriginal youth is the continuing destructive effect of substance abuse on the cohesion and integrity of their communities.

Alcoholism identified as the main cause of family problems such as incest and sexual abuse (Bell, 1993:5). Further, the youth see through many of the older generation's denial of the depth of the problem and the seriousness of its effects. The youth think it necessary to acknowledge problem of alcohol and its effects on the social and cultural integrity of the community. They see all forms of substance abuse as larger issue (contributed to by other factors such as boredom, peer pressure and low self-esteem

discussed in other contexts). The view is represented in this somewhat pessimistic evaluation in Whitedog study as described in Godin-Beers (1994:28):

Participants were of the opinion that alcohol was so deeply entrenched in the community that it could not be removed. In fact, [the Whitedog study] states that alcohol abuse is no longer the target of community-level action...It appears to be the belief that younger people are 'sniffing' while older population (sic) are 'drinkers.'

The youth are drawn into the web of denial over time and themselves come to reflect these same attitudes -- and they can be explained away as coping or defense mechanisms by experts, but the youth see only the destructive effects on themselves and others. In what must have been a difficult process of self-reflection and indictment of prevailing attitudes in their communities, youth saw severe problems of sex abuse and gendered violence flowing from frustration and alcohol abuse and leading to larger problems of societal mistrust, emotional reserve, lack of communication and general inability to engage in healthy personal relationships.

The youth clearly see the resolution of this situation in the revival of traditional practices in order to strengthen family relations. By injecting alcohol and other destructive substances into the community, what in effect happens is that a barrier is created between family members and relatives, over time hardening into walls of alienation even between the closest of families as people instead turn inward and use alcohol. By re-focusing on family responsibility and validation of traditional roles, the

youth believe that people in their communities can re-build the relationships which in the past guaranteed social security.

The problems identified by youth are not limited to the social realm. The lack of unity on a political level in many communities also takes a toll on their emotional security. The feeling is that just as destructive patterns of social behavior constitute a threat, so do confrontational and violent patterns of political conflict. The lack of unity within communities is negatively impacting on youth with the result that there is an acceptance of a general lack of respect. The youth feel that all community members need to work together to engender communication, trust and respect in community.

Key Recommendations on Community

Aboriginal youth want all members of their communities to get involved in the promotion of cultural values and in transferring cultural knowledge to youth.

Economics

The studies did not speak in any significant way to the issues of employment or economic development, save for the Green Lake study's reinforcing the Métis nation's positions with respect to Métis territorial claims and economic development plans without specific reference to youth concerns.

Health

Aboriginal youth understand that many of the health problems facing their communities have very mundane causes: it is a lack of recreational activities that leads to boredom,

presents a counter-incentive to health and fitness, and an real incentive to engage in all sorts of unhealthy activities. This problem especially pronounced for females, as the facilities and activities that do exist are mainly oriented toward male sports.

From this simple view of the causes of unhealthy lifestyles among Aboriginal youth, they deepen their understanding when it comes to the issue healing people from the effects of destructive self-behavior. The youth have a holistic view of health that encompasses the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health of the individual. And relate the health of the individual to the health and security of the community as a whole. Their keen understanding in this respect foreshadows the type of thinking which will be necessary to re-build Aboriginal communities along traditional lines. For so long, and without success, Aboriginal communities have been offered solutions to their problems which desegregate the various aspects of life; the youth seem to be leading the older generations back to traditional ways of understanding the necessity of securing a balance and addressing needs as interdependent parts of an organic whole.

With this understanding, the major problem identified by youth as impacting on their physical and emotional health was a lack of sex education, STD prevention and access to birth control, as health issues and as contributing factors to educational drop out rate and low self-esteem.

Key Recommendations on Health

Aboriginal youth want more recreational facilities

Aboriginal youth want to be free from substance abuse

Aboriginal youth want access to healthy lifestyles

Aboriginal youth want adequate health care facilities

Justice and Policing

The issues of justice and policing are very practical concerns for Aboriginal youth, as documented in other RCAP studies. Unfortunately, the one Youth Perspectives community study which focused exclusively on this issue was highly problematic in terms of its method and conclusions. The Edmonton Youth Study focused exclusively on incarcerated Métis individuals (an inherently limited sampling of Edmonton's Aboriginal youth population, especially given the fact that there was no possibility of investigating youths demonstrating a successful resistance to criminality) and concluded with linking lack of sports and recreation with criminal behavior.

As discussed above with relation to health, a lack of recreational behavior has been linked to engendering boredom and channeling youths toward other unhealthy behaviors, but it is unwarranted to make a causative linkage between boredom and criminality (as opposed to self-destructive behavior)-- there are deeper causes, and this simplistic formulation distracts from a serious analysis of the socio-political and economic roots of criminality among Aboriginal people. Aside from the methodological problem in using the criminals' own justifications for crimes as socio-political data to critique the justice system (their statements were not balanced with research to verify claims), the study did not expand its analysis beyond a summary and critique of programs for incarcerated individuals.

Key Recommendations on Justice and Policing

Aboriginal Justice Programs should be established with federal and provincial governments to meet the special needs of Aboriginal young people.

Aboriginal youth recommend the establishment of Community Justice Models.

Aboriginal youth want the justice system reformed to reflect a more holistic approach to behavioral change.

Cultural Identity

Aboriginal youth did recognize that strong distinct identities still exist among community-based Aboriginal people, but that there is a major problem in channeling the energy of these identities in a positive fashion. The major concern for the youth in particular being a lack of opportunities to participate in community politics. The youth in many cases expressed an alienation from community leadership because of the lack of responsiveness to their need to participate in their culture as expressed in community decision-making processes.

In a marked shift from the political culture problem, in considering cultural issues on a broader level, the youth defined 'culture' as language (as a means of understanding culture and history) and art. With this view, they make a strong statement in their perspective that it is necessary to learn Native languages, and thus that existing language programs should be expanded.

One problematic aspect of the youth perspective is that the youth seem to believe

that 'cultural disintegration,' as reflected in the erosion of traditional cultural skills and Native language loss, should be addressed primarily at school (this was explicitly stated in the Whitedog study, for example, and implied in the others). First of all, 'cultural disintegration' as discussed in the Whitedog study (Godin-Beers, 1994:32) assumes a static conception of culture which holds Aboriginal youth to an outmoded ideal predicated on a natural environment, political economy and social structure which is no longer capable of being reproduced in contemporary Native societies. Being held up to an unattainable standard alienates youth from their own history by demonstrating in a very basic way how inadequate and 'un-Native' they are because they are not living like their ancestors. Predicating any reform on a cultural ideal rooted in a romantic (or even real) past which is out of reach in the present or foreseeable future leads to a further lowering of self-esteem and increased alienation rather than positive development of the individual and community.

Secondly, schools are inherently Eurocentric in structure, philosophy and task; there should be some critical thought given to the idea that responsibility for transmitting traditional cultural knowledge and life skills lies with institutions designed for a different purpose. The question is: do young people expect too much from the school system, and not enough from other institutions such as the family? It would seem that the obstacles to reforming schools are legion and that they would be best thought of as bridging institutions which may serve as a forum in which Aboriginal youth can gain skills and information; parallel to other processes underway in their communities akin to the 'right of passage' initiative discussed in the Kahnawake community study (Deer, 1994). To place the burden of cultural preservation on schools is dangerous given

the degree to which non-Native governments and teachers still control the learning process in most schools -- even those in which jurisdictional authority has been delegated to Aboriginal institutions. Emphasis must be placed instead on community leaders, women, and elders. What is clear in the recent experience of Aboriginal peoples as a whole is that, notwithstanding the youth perspective on this issue, a sense of responsibility for the development of youth themselves must be engendered within communities rather than delegating responsibility and shifting the onus to White teachers and government-funded education structures.

II. SUMMARY AND COMPARISON OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth Issues in General Recommendations

Economic Development -- this section contains recommendations for a National Scholarship Program to support 200-300 students per year, conditional on a requirement to work in Aboriginal communities or institutions in lieu of repayment.

Focus on the Family -- this section contained strong recommendation that Aboriginal

leaders take firm stand on family violence (eliminating risks, preventing violence and promoting peace). The section also recommends that programs and institutions be established to allow for the identification of problems and government intervention (through Native spirituality and 'sound cultural support systems') at 'high risk' stages of Aboriginal peoples' lifetimes, which youth would presumably be considered although the section did not specify. The section also recommend that youth be included in all community-level and national governing councils, as well as generally advocating the development 'modes of representation' which accommodate full participation of all groups traditionally underrepresented in .

Education -- the education section recommended that 'Aboriginal Youth Empowerment' be established as a primary goal for Aboriginal schools and for those with significant Aboriginal populations, with specific focus on promoting increased use of Aboriginal languages. The section recommended that the number of high schools located in Aboriginal communities be increased. And it also recommended that there be an increase in the number and funding support of co-op programs, as well as enhanced support of programs promoting the transition to mainstream economic activity and careers for young Aboriginal people.

Housing -- the housing section recommended the establishment of a formal 'right to shelter' for Aboriginal people within communities, and in urban areas with large Aboriginal populations.

Cultural Institutions -- the cultural section put forward a broad set of recommendations advocating that Aboriginal communities establish language conservation policies which include guarantees for use, formal education and family-oriented education initiatives.

Youth Perspectives -- The seven recommendations put forward by the Youth Perspectives team are specific measures designed to address key policy gaps in federal government programs dealing with Aboriginal youth:

The establishment of youth centres

The establishment of Aboriginal Youth Camps

Diversion of funds to provide recreational facilities

Increased Aboriginal programming on television & radio

Cooperative home construction program

Development of a comprehensive national youth policy

Biennial Aboriginal youth conference

Comparing the Recommendations

As evidenced in the community studies discussed above (and outlined in more detail in the appended *Synthesis Paper*), the set of recommendations offered by Aboriginal youth did not dwell on specifics so much present some very basic challenges to the existing order within communities. The focus of the youth perspective is on rectifying the social and political imbalances in their communities, and on addressing the loss of culture as manifested in declining Native language skills and links to traditional cultural skills.

The youth for the most part rejected the categorization of their concerns -- which can be seen as reflective of a deeper rejection of the priorities established by the current generation of leaders within their communities and at the national level as reflected in the design of the RCAP's research agenda on youth issues.

²They did not concern themselves with larger and more political objectives such as self-government and economic development, instead turning to a critique of their situations focusing on cultural issues, social cohesion and identity.

It should not be surprising that the Aboriginal youth perspective is characterized by such foci; studies of youth culture in other contexts points to the overriding concern of youth as being oriented toward self-definition and the creation of identity and meaning.³

But this realization should cause concern because as youth generally are in a stage of

²The studies were not conducted in a manner which would allow for a deeper theoretical analysis of an emergent youth culture among Aboriginal people. Purely descriptive, they do provide a general overview of the situation in particular communities, but are characterized by an unfortunate lack of a unifying analytic frame (even the categories designed to structure the reporting of youth responses were underutilized or ignored by the researchers).

³See: Vered Amit-Talai and Helena Wulff, eds., *Youth Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (NY: Routledge, 1995); and, James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (Toronto: Stoddard, 1994).

development where the search for meaning is so important, Aboriginal youth in Canada are faced with situations which make that search extremely problematic. The voice of Aboriginal youth in Canada constitutes a desperate appeal for balance and stability; for the restoration of a coherent and appropriate set of values in their communities so that the youth can face the challenge of defining themselves as people unhindered by the double-burden attempting to find themselves in a world lost to social pathology, political turmoil and personal violence.

Aboriginal youth are essentially looking for respect. The major concern in their commentary on community politics and justice issues was that respect was not shown to Aboriginal youth. But what is 'respect'? Aboriginal youth do seem to appreciate the difference between listening and valuing, and in doing so point to the true meaning of the term. Common conceptions of respect limit it to a sense of deference in merely listening to the concerns of others, or showing some concern for another perspective; but true respect is much more than that.

Real respect is honoring the objectives of others even if you do not share them; it is a willingness to accept the views of others on their own terms; and to make sincere efforts to accommodate the goals of other people. The goals and objectives of Aboriginal youth are quite distinct from other people in Canada, they are different from non-Native youth, and different in significant ways even from other segments of Aboriginal people. But Aboriginal youth want respect for the insight they have and the solutions they are proposing.

With this in mind, the recommendations put forward by the Commission need to be evaluated on a unique set of criteria. Questions of costing and political expediency

fade in comparison to the very basic criteria which emerge from the youth community studies. The recommendations, to be deemed worthwhile, must address the following question in an honest and significant manner: will the proposed measure eliminate some of the social, political and cultural instability in Aboriginal communities? If the proposed measures are driven by another set of priorities, then they are not worthwhile in the view of Aboriginal youth. If they take a too distant approach address surface issues which will have only marginal or long-term impacts, then they are not appropriate in the view of Aboriginal youth. And if they buttress the status quo in any way, then the measures should be rejected in the view of Aboriginal youth.

The Commission itself can evaluate the recommendations it is considering, and balance their other pressing concerns with this statement of the Aboriginal youth perspective. But any consideration of reform should be done with the realization that Aboriginal youth will be the next generation of Native leaders, and that as a whole they constitute the group which will evaluate the work of the Commission itself and determine its value. They will also, in many different positive and negative ways, reflect the work society as a whole does to rectify the unjust situation facing Aboriginal peoples in Canada today. We would be wise to pay close heed to their voice, and to respect their vision and their priorities.