Exhibit: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

Location/Phase: Part III: Quebec City

Witness: Corey O'Soup

Submitted by: Christa Big Canoe

Add'l info: Commission Counsel

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Shhh...

LISTEN!!

WE HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY!

YOUTH VOICES FROM THE NORTH

SASKATCHEWAN advocate
a Voice for Children and Youth

A SPECIAL REPORT ON THE YOUTH SUICIDE CRISIS IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN


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SASKATCHEWAN
advocate
a Voice for Children and Youth

Letter of Transmittal

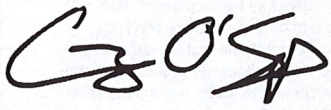
December 5, 2017

The Honourable Corey Tochor
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
Legislative Building
2405 Legislative Drive
Regina SK S4S 0B3

Dear Mr. Speaker:

In accordance with Sections 14(1) and 14(3) of *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act,* it is my duty and privilege to submit to you and the members of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan this special report:
Shhh...LISTEN!! We Have Something To Say! Youth Voices From The North

Respectfully,



Corey O'Soup
Advocate for Children and Youth
Province of Saskatchewan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent officer of the legislative assembly whose work is done under *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act, 2012*. The Advocate's mandate and authority is broad, yet specific, and includes advocacy for children and youth; investigations into any matter where children and youth receive services from any government, agency or publicly funded health entity; public education; and research. Our work and this project is grounded in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*, both of which are foundational to the Advocate's office fundamental goal of being part of solutions that result in positive change in the quality of life for First Nations and Métis children in this province.

Regrettably, the staggering rate of suicide amongst Indigenous children and youth in Saskatchewan is one indication that change is needed. This picture is appalling, showing that suicide rates in our province are 6 times higher for First Nations boys than non-First Nations boys aged 10 to 19, and 26 times higher for First Nations girls than non-First Nations girls of the same age. A cluster of suicides of six young girls in northern Saskatchewan in October 2016 is further evidence that immediate action is required. Our office is raising alarm bells regarding this situation. Our children deserve better.

This project had two objectives. Pursuant to the authority of sections 14(1) and 14(3) of our Act, the first objective was to engage with Indigenous youth in northern Saskatchewan to better understand youth suicide from their perspective and to honour and reflect their voice as part of this understanding. The world experienced by young people today and the pressures they face, in general, are different from that of previous generations. Furthermore, it is well established that northern Indigenous communities are especially vulnerable due to their isolation, the travesty of colonial history and the lasting effects of the intergenerational trauma resulting from residential schools. Moreover, the youth of northern Saskatchewan, specifically, are a distinct population with unique strengths and challenges, and we wanted to ensure their voices were reflected in literature on this issue.

Our team spent the last year in northern Saskatchewan meeting with Indigenous youth about their perceptions, realities, and lived experiences related to youth suicide. This work included presentations to over one thousand youth across 12 northern communities (north of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan) about our office and about this project. Of this, 264 indigenous youth volunteered to meet with us to talk about the topic of youth suicide in their communities. To inform this work prior to meeting with the youth, our team met with Elders, Chiefs, leaders, and communities for both support and guidance for this report. Our office also had the support of the Elders throughout this project and we are very grateful for their wisdom, guidance, knowledge, and prayers before we met with the youth and moved through the project to its conclusion.

The second objective of this report is to be a platform for the voices of these young people to be heard. Children and youth have a right to express their views in all matters that affect them and for their opinions to be taken seriously. There are many communities and organizations in Saskatchewan taking steps to address the issue of youth suicide. Our Indigenous youth are our future change-makers and we must LISTEN to what they have to say about their circumstances. Our leaders must LISTEN to what these youth need.

In our discussions with children and youth in northern Saskatchewan, they identified the many distinctive strengths of their peers, families and communities, but also the serious challenges they continue to face. Several themes regarding these challenges emerged from the voices of the youth. What is striking about these themes is the reflection of the raw, yet honest accounts of how these young people see the issue of suicide due to their direct and indirect experiences with it. Their experiences and their needs are unique to their regions, yet their voices also mirror that of many Indigenous youth across this country who have similar needs to reach their optimal wellness and to live to their full potential. The below themes represent what the youth described as factors contributing to or impacting thoughts of suicide. Their responses are consistent with the abundance of literature in this area. Several subthemes to these main themes can be found in the body of the report.

- **The Impact of Bullying and Cyberbullying**
- **Lack of Emotional Support**
- **The Impact of Substance Misuse**
- **Lack of Physical Safety**
- **Lack of Activities**
- **Impact on Emotional and Mental Wellness**

Along with the themes identifying why young people might think about suicide, are a number of themed calls to action reflecting what the youth saw as important to providing a sense of wellness and to fulfilling their right to reach their full potential. The below themes are indicative of what is required by communities and by the provincial and federal governments to meet these young people's immediate needs. To be most effective, a holistic approach will be required to address all areas identified by the youth.

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: STOP BULLYING!

- Educate adults, parents, youth and communities on bullying
- Take action when bullying is witnessed or reported

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: INCREASE POSITIVE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IN THE COMMUNITY

- Create forums to increase meaningful peer, family and school support
- Pay attention and reach out to youth
- See us, hear us - before it's too late
  - Listen!
  - Understand!
  - Take us seriously!
  - Ask us what we need!

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: ADDRESS DRUGS AND ALCOHOL IN OUR COMMUNITIES

- Increased supports for adults and communities
- Supports for youth

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: KEEP US SAFE!

- More security in the community

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: PROVIDE MEANINGFUL AND DIVERSE ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH

- More activities needed

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: HELP US!

- Need for coping skills
- Increased mental health resources in the community that meet youth needs
- More and/or different options to enhance youth well-being
- Suicide Awareness Education
- Increased awareness of available supports

The importance of the youth speaking out cannot be overstated and it is incumbent on the Advocate to carry their calls to action forward to communities and to both the provincial and federal governments.

This report stands as a testimony of Indigenous youth on the topic of suicide. It is to empower young people to call out for the change they need to be mentally, spiritually, physically and emotionally healthy. It is about letting them know that someone is listening and will be strongly advocating for their well-being.

The voices of the youth presented here, combined with the appalling and persistent statistics demonstrating their risk, reflect the extreme urgency with which these young people require substantial help. Their voices also reinforce the answers reflected within the depth of work previously done on this issue across Canada. The existing research, reports, commissions, plans and strategies list numerous recommendations and calls to action, many of which are referenced throughout this report. What else can the Advocate recommend when the path is clear on what needs to be done?

What is needed is immediate action. With this, the Advocate adds five calls to action to those made by the youth. We call on the Government of Saskatchewan to support both the development of the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nation's (FSIN) Saskatchewan First Nations Suicide Strategy, and the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan in the ongoing implementation of their Métis Suicide Prevention Strategy. The Advocate also calls on the provincial government to formally adopt Jordan's Principle. Last, the Advocate calls on the federal government to fully implement Jordan's Principle without delay and to support the above suicide prevention strategies to address the calls of the Indigenous youth of this province. These calls to action are listed below and discussed in the body of the report:

CALL TO ACTION:

The Government of Saskatchewan work in partnership with the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations to support a Saskatchewan First Nations Suicide Prevention Strategy. The development of this strategy should:

- include the perspectives of Indigenous youth;
- be supported and implemented in a way that increases the capacity of communities;
- involve partnerships, where needed, with provincial ministries such as Health, Education, and Social Services; and
- be financially supported by the provincial government, as required, as the lives of our children and youth are everyone's responsibility.

CALL TO ACTION:

The Government of Saskatchewan work in partnership with the Métis Nation to further support the implementation of the existing Métis Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, ensuring that it:

- supports the implementation of the strategy in a way that increases the capacity of communities;
- involves partnerships, where needed, with provincial ministries such as Health, Education, and Social Services; and
- is financially supported by the provincial government, as required, as the lives of children and youth are everyone's responsibility.

CALL TO ACTION:

The Government of Canada work with, and fully support, the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations and the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan to support their suicide prevention strategies, including providing financial support as required.

CALL TO ACTION:

The Government of Canada put an end to the inequities faced by Indigenous children and youth in Saskatchewan by fully implementing Jordan's Principle.

CALL TO ACTION:

The Government of Saskatchewan formally adopt Jordan's Principle and work in partnership with Indigenous governments, leaders, and communities to leverage the resources available under Jordan's Principle.

The Indigenous children of northern Saskatchewan and throughout this province deserve to have their voices heard and an end to the inequities brought about by colonization. The federal and provincial governments must be held to account in their commitment to bring about the change required to undo past damage done by government to Indigenous peoples. This will be paramount so that children are not left suffering or dying waiting for help. It will be imperative that the Advocate for Children and Youth have a role at the federal level pertaining to the welfare of Indigenous children and youth in this province. The benefit of the Advocate holding a role at this table will be the opportunity to ensure the voices of Indigenous children and youth in Saskatchewan are heard at the highest level, to provide a deeper context to the issues faced by these young people, and to be part of the path forward. Our Indigenous children and youth deserve nothing less.

ADVOCATE'S MESSAGE TO THE YOUTH



As the first Indigenous Advocate for the province of Saskatchewan, I came to this position with an open mind and heart to the children and youth of this province. At the onset, I knew that I wanted to engage at a deeper level with children and youth who are one of our most vulnerable groups, and even more so for Indigenous children and youth. The crisis of six young girls who died by suicide in northern Saskatchewan compelled me to go North to listen and learn from the communities, families, stakeholders, and most importantly, our young people. The below message is for all of the young people who are speaking loudly for the action needed to bring about change.

Thank you to all for your courage to speak to us on the difficult topic of youth suicide. You invited us into your schools, your communities and most of all, into your lives. It is your thoughts, opinions, ideas and perspectives that will drive change and improve the situation for your communities and for other communities who face similar issues. I firmly believe that your voice has been largely overlooked in the efforts to transform systems that may not be serving you well.

It is my honour to present you with this report that represents a powerful tool to help others understand what you, the youth, are feeling and what is required in order to face the issue of suicide and build on the strength and resilience that resides among the people, families and communities in northern Saskatchewan.

In return for the courage that you have shown by speaking to us, we will commit to you that this report will not sit on a shelf and collect dust. We commit to you that we will continue to use the mandate of our office to advocate for this report with governments and decision-makers at every level - federal, provincial, First Nations and local leadership. We commit to you that this is not the last time you will hear from us! We will continue to visit you and talk to you about this issue and other issues that matter to you. We know that building these strong relationships gives us the strength and confidence to advocate on your behalf. You are our number one priority, and we will be here for you always.

Sincerely, Your Advocate

Corey O'Soup
Advocate for Children and Youth



1.0 INTRODUCTION

A FOUNDATION OF RIGHTS

Our office is guided by the principles found in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Saskatchewan Children and Youth First Principles and the Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth and Families.

UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (UNCRC)

All people have human rights. Children and youth require special protections because many decisions are made on their behalf by adults. In 1991, Canada ratified the UNCRC – a legally-binding international instrument that guarantees these special protections. The UNCRC has 54 articles protecting children's rights by setting standards in health care; education; and legal, civil and social services. The 4 core principles of the UNCRC are:

- Non-discrimination
- Best interests of the child
- Right to life, survival and development
- Respect for the views of the child

UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (UNDRIP)

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is guided by the purpose and principles of the Charter of the United Nations which recognizes and affirms Indigenous people's inherent rights. The UNDRIP references 46 articles that speak about rights to:

- Land
- Culture and language
- Self-determination
- Non-discriminatory or oppressive practices
- Protection of elders, women, and children
- Right to survive and develop
- Liberty and freedom
- Participate in any decision that affects Indigenous people

Article 21 and 22 specifically reference that particular attention shall be paid to the continuing improvement of the social and economic conditions as pertains to the special needs of elders, women, youth and children. It also references that the 'State', in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take measures to ensure Indigenous women and children are afforded special protections.



SASKATCHEWAN CHILDREN AND YOUTH FIRST PRINCIPLES

Our office distilled the 54 articles of the UNCRC into those most applicable to Saskatchewan. These principles were adopted by the provincial government in 2009 which include the following:

- Those rights defined by the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*
- Participate and be heard before any decision affecting them is made.
- Have their 'best interests' given paramount consideration in any action or decision involving them
- An equal standard of care, protection and services
- The highest standard of health and education possible in order to reach their fullest potential
- Safety and protection from all forms of physical, emotional and sexual harm, while in the care of parents, governments, legal guardians or any person
- Be treated as the primary client, and at the centre, of all child serving systems
- Have consideration given to the importance of their unique life history and spiritual traditions and practices, in accordance with their stated views and preferences

TOUCHSTONES OF HOPE FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Touchstone of Hope are principles that set out a 4-step process for reconciliation in child welfare, but can be applicable to many other areas in which children are served, including relating, restoring, truth telling and acknowledging. This process is based on 5 principles:

- Self-determination
- Respect for culture and language
- Importance of structural intervention
- Non-discrimination
- Holistic approach

OUR FUNDAMENTAL GOAL

To be part of solutions that result in positive change in the quality of life for First Nations and Métis children and youth.

OUR MISSION

Empowering children and youth to be change-makers.

OUR VISION

The rights, well-being and voice of children and youth are respected and valued.

OUR VALUES

- Place children and youth first
- Respect First Nations and Métis language and culture
- Embrace reconciliation
- Provide accessible, fair, appropriate, and timely service
- Inclusive of all

MANDATE – HOW WE REACH OUR GOALS

The Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent officer of the Legislative Assembly. The Advocate for Children and Youth leads a team of professionals to advocate for the rights, interests and well-being of children and youth in Saskatchewan.

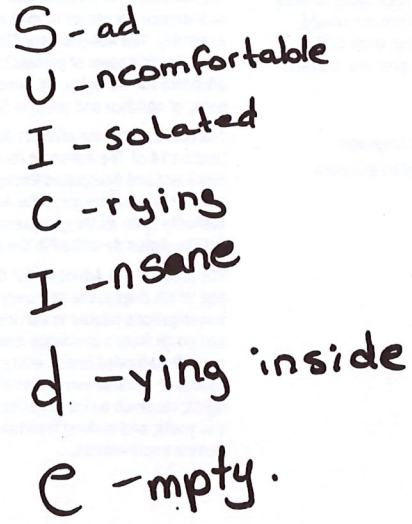
The mandate for our office is defined in Section 14 of *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act* and interpreted through a child rights lens. The Act gives the Advocate the authority to do all things necessary to carry out the duties described in the Act.

The office of the Advocate for Children and Youth engages in advocacy and investigations related to services for children and youth from a provincial ministry, agency, or publicly-funded health entity; public education to raise awareness of children rights; research on issues affecting children and youth; and making recommendations for service improvement.

2.0 EXPLORING THE LANDSCAPE OF SUICIDE AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

> ***"It's not something we can just get over. You can't just push it aside. We need help. Everyone is at risk for suicide."***

Death by suicide is a serious and complex issue in our Canadian society across all populations. However, when examining the rates of suicide amongst our Indigenous children and youth in Canada, and in Saskatchewan particularly, the picture is appalling. Losing a young person to suicide is heartbreaking for their family, friends and the community in which they live. For decades, we have known that suicide among Indigenous people has been *"[...] one of the most urgent problems".*[4] Yet, we are continuing to lose our Indigenous children. These tragedies must stop. All children have a right to life, and to a life well-lived.[5]



SUICIDE IN CANADA

GENERAL POPULATION

Suicide is "one of the top 10 causes of death in Canada" for all age ranges and the 2nd leading cause of death for youth aged 15-24.[6]

The suicide rate for male children and adolescents is decreasing, but is increasing for female children and adolescents.[7]

INDIGENOUS POPULATION

The rate of suicide among Indigenous communities is approximately double that of the Canadian population as a whole. The rate for Inuit people is 6 to 11 times higher than the rest of Canada.[8]

Out of all youth aged 10 to 29 in Canada, Indigenous youth living on reserve are 5 to 6 times more likely to die by suicide than non-Indigenous youth.[9]

Indigenous youth are more likely to consider suicide if one or more parent and/or grandparent attended residential school.[10]

Although statistics describing risk of suicide among Métis youth are not clear, 16% of Métis people between the ages of 18 and 25 reported having thought about suicide in their lifetime.*

SUICIDE IN SASKATCHEWAN

GENERAL POPULATION

The rate of girls aged 10 to 18 dying by suicide has increased significantly from 2003 to 2014.[11]

19% of youth in grades 7 to 12 throughout Saskatchewan have considered suicide and 11% have attempted suicide at least once.[12]

Saskatchewan has the highest rate of youth suicide among the provinces, exceeded only by the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.[13]

INDIGENOUS POPULATION

The rate of death by suicide among First Nations people in Saskatchewan is 4.3 times higher than the rate among non-First Nations people in the province.[14]

In the last five years, nearly half of youth (27 of 64) who died by suicide aged 0 to 18 were identified as North American Indian (Status and Non-Status)[15], despite only representing approximately 16% of the general Saskatchewan population.[16]

In Saskatchewan, the rate of suicide is 6 times higher for First Nations boys than non-First Nations boys aged 10 to 19, and 26 times higher for First Nations girls than non-First Nations girls of the same age. [17]

The rate of suicide by First Nations girls aged 10 to 19 has now exceeded the rate of First Nations boys.[18]

FOCUS ON YOUTH IN THE NORTH

Our office has chosen to focus on youth in northern Saskatchewan for the purposes of this report. Suicide in this region has been a significant issue which is reflected in the clusters of youth dying by suicide in some northern communities in the past decade. The issue came to the forefront of public consciousness again in October 2016 when six Indigenous girls aged 11-14 died by suicide. Families lost daughters, granddaughters, sisters, cousins and friends. Six young girls lost their future, and we know there are others after them who are also now gone. Additionally, many more young people have been identified as having attempted suicide or being at risk of doing so.

Northern Indigenous communities are especially vulnerable due to their colonized history and the lasting effects of the intergenerational trauma resulting from residential schools. This impact is evidenced by the disproportionate number of Indigenous youth who have died by suicide. Losing so many Indigenous youth, and all youth for that matter, is a responsibility that the province of Saskatchewan and the federal government carries.

Along with many other committed individuals, we want to do our part to advocate for improved outcomes for the well-being of the children and youth in Saskatchewan. One insightful young person stated that, ***Suicide is not the problem. It is the backlash of the problem.*** This truth is reflected in the abundance of academic research on the issue of youth suicide which has identified some underlying risk factors, including: low income and poverty, poor housing, limited education achievement, gender, LGBTQ orientation, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), parental conflict, bullying, interpersonal difficulties, substance misuse, diagnosis of a mental illness, impulsivity, low self-esteem, lack of problem-solving skills, perfectionism, factors related to geographical isolation, hopelessness and prior suicide attempts.[19]

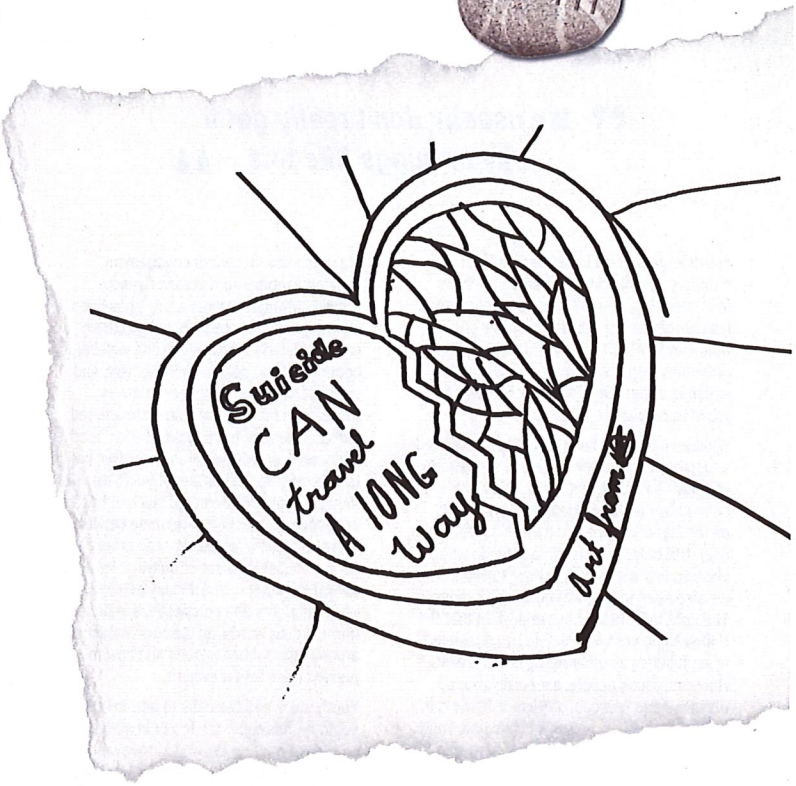
However, little research is available reflecting the voices of youth on this topic. Marginalizing the voices of young people on important issues that affect them is no longer an option. We must listen carefully to what youth have to say about the factors that lead to youth suicide.



We talk about the physical and mental self all the time, but we don't talk about the emotional self. We say, "I'm Ok." Or "fine", even though we're not.

- Elder





We have beautiful youth that are very intelligent. Get them to speak up. If you promise a youth something you need to do it. Only now are we starting to listen to youth- they matter.

- Elder



3.0 THE CASE FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND YOUTH VOICE

> ***"We usually don't really get a say in things like this"***

Youth engagement is defined as "[...] empowering all youth as valued partners in addressing, and making decisions about issues that affect them personally and/or that they believe to be important." [20] This definition aligns with our office's mission which is about, *Empowering children and youth to be change-makers.*

Children and youth have a right to be involved and to have their voices heard in all matters or decisions that affect them. This right is defined by the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) *(see text box)*. Not only do we need to *listen* to what children and young people have to say, but we also need to take what they say *seriously*. The right to be heard is so important that the United Nations says it should be considered when fulfilling all other rights in the UNCRC.[21] However, young people, especially those in disadvantaged groups, often face barriers in having their voices heard.[22] Indigenous youth living in the North may feel disempowered from mainstream society due to geographical isolation and historical marginalization, as well as from lack of meaningful engagement opportunities within their communities.

UNCRC ARTICLE 12(1):

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

We recognize that youth engagement is gaining momentum across Canada. Provincially and nationally, there has been a trend toward connecting with youth on issues related to their health and well-being, community and political involvement, and educational needs.[23] These initiatives touch upon many of the risk factors noted earlier. When the topic of suicide is directly addressed, survey questions are often limited to determining the number of youth that have thought about or attempted suicide. In some instances, connections are made between survey questions on suicide and other themes such as substance use or bullying. However, published projects specifically gathering youth thoughts and perspectives, reflected through their words, on the circumstances around suicidal behaviour[24] and how to prevent it are less prevalent.

Youth voice and the calls to action by the youth on this topic are found in some reports published in other provinces following clusters of suicides similar to what occurred in northern Saskatchewan.[25] Additionally, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs met with Indigenous youth representatives across the country to tackle this issue in 2017 for their report titled *Breaking Point: The Suicide Crisis in Indigenous Communities.*[26] Unfortunately, the voice of Saskatchewan youth has not been represented well, if at all, in published literature.

Until recently there has been minimal engagement with youth in this province about the issue of suicide despite the high suicide rate of Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan. One effort to engage youth after the six girls and adolescents died by suicide in the North was the Ignite the Life Rally held in Saskatoon in February 2017. Approximately 450 youth attended from communities across the North to "share their thoughts, feelings and experiences about suicide".[27] Information from this rally, including artwork from the young people, was shared with our office and is highlighted throughout this report.

We also learned, and wish to acknowledge, that First Nations and Métis communities, Tribal Councils, organizations, schools, provincial health regions and adult allies have since mobilized to find community-specific ways to address this issue. In some of these forums, spaces have been made for youth to contribute to these discussions.

This report is meant to complement that important work using our office as a platform to amplify the voices of northern Saskatchewan youth publicly. It is intended to provide a space for youth to tell governments and communities what they need to help them deal with the risks they face and the loss they experience – in their words. It's about ensuring the lived reality of the youth in the North is made visible and reflected in an appropriate and respectful manner, and to give them hope that they will be heard. It is crucial that we listen to what our youth are telling us about the issue of suicide in their communities.

Since taking office as the Advocate for Children and Youth, Corey O'Soup has stated that our young people know best what challenges they face and what they need. But it's not enough to simply gather their voices. Most importantly, there must be meaningful change and real action attached to what they're telling us.

THE ADVOCATE SPEAKING TO A YOUTH FOCUS GROUP

"I'm supposed to be your voice. And if I can't talk to you guys and hear what you're saying, then I can't be that proper voice. So, for me, the most important thing is that the solutions will come from you. Right? It's not our job to interpret what you're saying, or to filter it. If you say it, then I believe that that's how we have to print it. If you're saying it, then that's the way you mean it. [...] I don't want this type of a report to collect dust, you know, on a shelf. And we will hold the governments – and we will hold your leaders – to task on whatever comes out on this report."

-Corey O'Soup, Advocate for Children and Youth



WHAT YOUTH WANT ADULTS TO KNOW ABOUT SUICIDE

That not every smile is real and some days their thoughts kill them inside everyday and they think it's all over. But in reality it isn't.

Adults need to listen about bullying and take action.

Youth are capable of doing whatever they want to. So don't ever take a person's behavior change lightly. Talk to people about it. Help someone.

I want them to know what the youth go through.

That even though people seem fine they aren't and that they want someone to trust.

How important you are to them.

That we aren't seeking for attention, we actually need help. Don't bring us down further. You need to know when we are actually not okay. Keep us busy, if we are busy we shouldn't be sad. And please don't isolate us, it only makes us feel worse. We aren't being dramatic, we actually need help. And in isolated communities like us in the North, there is no help.

Our youth is different from back then, more of our youth are trying to take their lives, and at a younger ages. People need to start realizing that not everyone is okay, most of us are not.

People who take their life believe that nobody cares about them.

That it happens because sometimes we hide stuff from our parents because we're scared. [...] Some are depressed and just don't talk about it.

Look for more signs, a lot of youth become quiet when they feel alone. They isolate themselves from other friends and socialization.

So, like, if someone has an anxiety of being around people and what not, an adult's response could be as straight up as "Well just get outside and go talk". And then, that's it. That's the only thing you'll be told and then you're just left with a pointless answer and then you find out that you can't even go to an adult, either, at the same time.

That it's not a joke.

Adults are Addicted to there [sic] phones. Adults don't know that the children are lonely.

It's easy to hide your feelings [...if adults knew that] They wouldn't stop asking.

Parents need more trust in kids.

When the adult was a teenager, it was a different time, which makes it hard to understand.

Don't always believe youth when they say there fine, check on them, make sure your children is getting the right help not just check-ups. Help for people who are slowly giving up. Some people are very stubborn.

Everyone should be talking to us about it and not just counsellors.

The reasons they're trying to end their lives, and how they look when they're sad so they could go and help/cheer them up. And when they say okay but they actually aren't, so ask.

Take it seriously before it's too late. Listen.

4.0 WHAT WE DID AND HOW WE DID IT

Throughout this project, we applied a rights-based and culturally appropriate approach with emphasis on the participation of youth and respect for the Indigenous communities that we visited. The three core principles of a human-rights based approach to work such as this are:

- The project should further the realization of human rights (ie: children's rights).
- Human rights should guide all phases of the project.
- The project should assist in the development of capacities of rights-holders to claim their rights and of duty-bearers to meet their obligations.[28]

Our work with the youth followed the *Guidelines for the Ethical Engagement of Young People*[29], the *Tri-Council Policy Statement-Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Human Participants*[30] and was conducted in consultation with the University of Saskatchewan Ethics Department. The steps below summarize this process:

- Reviewed literature to give us a better understanding of statistical trends and the level of youth engagement on this topic.
- Met with the Chiefs, leaders and stakeholders in communities who had lost young people to listen and learn from their experiences and explore a potential role for our office.
- Ensured Chiefs and appropriate leaders supported our work prior to meeting with youth in their communities.
- Consulted with Chief Bobby Cameron, Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations, at the onset of this project and provided an interim update on progress.
- Learned from the wisdom, and received the blessing of Cree, Dene, and Métis Elders from the North who provided their guidance throughout this work. Their wisdom was extremely valuable to shaping our approach and making meaningful connections with the youth.

SCOPE OF THIS WORK

LITERATURE REVIEW	COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT/ PERSPECTIVES (CHIEFS & COUNCIL, FSIN, HEALTH, COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS)	ELDERS KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM AND GUIDANCE
PRESENTATIONS TO YOUTH/INVITATIONS TO PARTICIPATE	YOUTH PARTICIPATION (FOCUS GROUPS/ QUESTIONNAIRES)	ANALYSIS AND THEMATIC FINDINGS
REPORTING THEMES BACK TO YOUTH	YOUTH CALLS TO ACTION	ADVOCATE CALLS TO ACTION





Youth Brainstorming

- Visited 12 communities across northern Saskatchewan (north of Prince Albert) spanning from East to West.
- Engaged community supports to help us connect with youth.
- Delivered presentations about the role of our office, child and youth rights in general and about this project, to just over 1,000 youth in school settings.
- 264 youth aged 10 to 18[31] participated in this project, with 228 joining group discussions and 36 completing written questionnaires.
  - To ensure this project was participatory, we ensured that the youth understood the intentions of the project, knew why their involvement was important (ie. Article 12), and volunteered after being informed of its purpose.[32]
  - The youth were in control of the information they provided and could share as much or as little as they wanted. Youth were assured that identifying information about themselves or their community would not be revealed.
  - Semi-structured interview questions were used, along with visual methods (sad and happy faces) pictured above to generate ideas about why young people might think about suicide and what is needed for prevention. This approach allowed the youth to de-personalize the sensitive subject of suicide from themselves.
  - Mental health supports were available during all group discussions for youth, and if necessary, to check in with them in the days following the discussions.
- Met with families who have lost children to suicide, as well as a survivor of past suicide attempts, to gather their perspectives on the issue and about prevention.
- The information gathered from youth in response to our questions about why youth think about suicide and what they need to address it resulted in several themes.
- Returned to the communities to report back to the youth on the overall themes and their calls to action, and provide an opportunity for youth to comment or give feedback before the report was finalized.

SOME OF THE QUESTIONS WE ASKED THE YOUTH

1. **What's it like to be a youth in your community?**
2. **Why do you think youth and kids in your community are thinking about taking their lives?**
3. **What do you want adults to know about suicide among youth?**
4. **What do youth and kids need to thrive and grow so suicide does not occur?**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and most importantly, we wish to express our deepest gratitude to all the youth who shared their voice and experiences to help us learn about how to prevent suicide among their peers. We want to extend a very special thank you to the Elders who provided their guidance, wisdom, and knowledge at the onset and throughout this work. We are also grateful for the support of the Chief and Council of the communities we engaged with and to our community contacts who helped us coordinate presentations and discussions, and to the mental health professionals who were there to support the youth. Last, we want to thank those responsible for hosting the Ignite the Life Conference for their generosity in making available materials and youth perspectives gathered during that conference.

5.0 BREAKING THE ICE



When initially meeting with the youth, we first asked what it's like for them to be a young person in their community. The reason for this is that we wanted to respect and honour the fact that many youth love their communities and life in northern regions. Their responses enhanced our understanding of the broad spectrum of their experiences and, while many young people talked about some of the positive things that they liked about where they live, they also spoke of some of the many challenges they face.

APPRECIATION FOR THE LAND, WATER AND TREES

Many young people described living in their communities as being, ***alright, awesome, good, cool and fun,*** and expressed an appreciation of the lakes, rapids, water and forest and how this environment provided a range of seasonal activities that they enjoyed. Fishing, exploring the woods, swimming, canoeing, boating, riding ski-doos, quads, dirt bikes and playing outside with friends provided a sense of belonging and freedom that many young people said they liked. One youth stated, ***it's fun because we get to go for bike rides and we get to be free [...] There's no strict rules like in the city.*** Some youth also spoke about the valuable time with parents and extended family participating in a traditional lifestyle of hunting and trapping.

BEING PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

Being physically active and participating in sports was also appreciated by a significant number of youth. Many indicated that they could join organized sports like hockey, volleyball, basketball, soccer, baseball, and track and field, with many of these offered at school. Some young people acknowledged they could pursue more competitive level sports, such as playing against teams from neighboring communities and participating in larger competitions like the North American Indigenous Games, or the summer and winter games.

Many youth also reported enjoying having spaces available, such as football fields, parks, or youth centres, that allowed for more informal peer activities. One youth explained that, ***I enjoy that I am active and able to do things like sports, fishing, and volunteering in my community.*** While several youth expressed positive views about sports, they recognized that opportunities in the community may be somewhat limited for youth that do not consider themselves as athletic.





COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES AND CONNECTEDNESS

A few youth told us they were grateful that their community had a school they could attend and that opening the gym or library outside of school hours so youth can participate in sports, play computer games, or cook was also appreciated stating,

For me, it is fun going to school and after school activities which is called gym night [...] everybody from my point of view seems to have something to do instead of making bad decisions.

> **Being youth in my community is enjoyable. There are a lot of activities being held after school hours but there is always room for improvement and more ideas.**

Youth described how they like going to places to hang out with their friends such as youth centres, parks or skate parks. Youth also told us it was beneficial to have special events that occur in the community once or twice per year. Family fun nights, youth fish derbies, youth conferences and cultural camps with Elders were examples given. As a couple of youth told us,

> **I like that they bring people from out of town – like entertainers. Usually the person will be at the Band hall and then go to the school. Like have Wellness Conferences. WE Matter [presenters] are so passionate. They're young and they're Indigenous.**

Like youth conferences, they bring other people here, like inspirational people.

Many youth also described attending events that bring the whole community together. Several young people acknowledged that their community has people who are kind, generous, friendly and that care about them. Not all, but some youth said they felt safe in their community and that having a close proximity to each other allowed youth to connect often with friends and family members. The strong bonds among people in smaller communities emerged from our discussions with the youth, some of whom stated,

There's friendly people in my community.

> **The support our Elders/ teachers give us to help us reach our goals. I like how they care about us as much as they do.**

How close everyone is.

I enjoy that I'm familiar with mostly everyone, so I don't feel like a stranger to many.

It is evident that many young people have strong connections to their communities and an appreciation for what the northern regions of Saskatchewan provide. Because of the nature of this report, it is critical to highlight the many positives identified by youth about what it is like to live in the North. However, it is also important to note that these young people also spoke of the challenges that many northern youth experience and these, too, must be acknowledged.





6.0 THE POWER OF YOUTH VOICE – THEMATIC FINDINGS AND CALLS TO ACTION

Being a youth today is very different than in the past. The struggles our young people face and the needs they have are not the same as those of previous generations. Moreover, the experiences of Indigenous youth in northern Saskatchewan are unique to that region. Therefore, to understand why young people in the North might be considering suicide, we needed to speak directly with the youth to honour their voices in this process and to better understand the issue of suicide from their perspective and experiences. The below themes represent the youth's responses regarding youth suicide and more importantly, provide their honest and raw insights and wisdom as to what these young people need to help them.

6.1 THE IMPACT OF BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING

> ***"Putting each other down on Facebook, Snapchat"***

Many youth indicated that bullying made it extremely hard to function in their community. Considering the heightened awareness of bullying in recent times, it was no surprise that bullying was a dominant theme. For example, several youth stated,

> **Youth and kids consider taking their lives because a lot of it is they get bullied from others in the community, or their family.**

They can be bullied, teased, or abused so they just wanna end the pain and suffering. I went through this once.

> **Kids think about suicide because they get bullied.**

Young people talked about emotional and physical bullying as including violent beatings, pushing, shoving, being harassed, chased or experiencing intimidation by adults or older youth. Some youth stated,

> **Challenges I face as a youth in my community are finding the right people to be friends with because of a lot of bullying.**

Bullying is, like, to this whole new extreme. Like, before I remember from elementary was like taking someone's shoes or something. Now it's violently beating someone and harassing them.

It can be a struggle sometimes to be a youth in my community because of how everyone treats everyone.

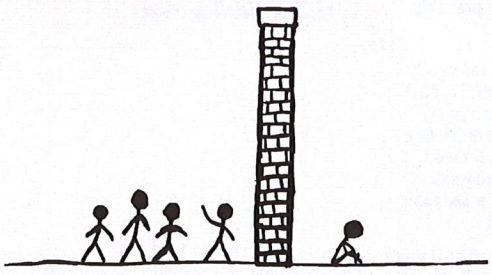
Youth told us bullying is 'everywhere', meaning both in-person and through social media. For instance, many youth reported that bullying occurs while walking in certain neighborhoods in the community, during school, in schoolyards, playgrounds, youth centres, and stores. One youth described that sometimes ***bullying happens at the park or wherever some kids are not around adults.***

Verbal bullying was described by youth as including swearing, name calling and teasing. Some youth told us that hurting someone's feelings, saying something mean before thinking and stealing personal items were also forms of bullying. Many youth stated,

It's honestly too much, because there are people in this generation that are too harsh with their words and what they do...They either text you or say it in person. It's like...it's very harsh. It makes people insecure about the way they feel [...].

Being bullied. Some people told him to kill himself because no one would miss him. But he means a lot to people.

> **Not thinking right – not thinking about what he is saying – being mean.**



> ***Because he/she is isolated. There's nothing to do if you're not popular. You become isolated, then this isolation turns into bullying. This bullying is what gets you down because you have no one to turn to.***

I always come back to the same question "Why- does- no-one- like- me" but then I think again who-- wouldn't judge me, then all the thoughts rush into my head Again, Again, and Again it's like a never ending train of thought but not the good kind of thought, the kind of thought that makes you feel as if you are drowning and can't catch your breath the kind of thought that feels like you're choking on something but really it's the anxiety building up in your throat making it feel like someone's sitting on you – but really it's just the reality of the world pressuring a person to be a certain way even though we're all not perfect.

- 15-year-old Youth

Teasing. But with teasing, you just say stuff you don't really mean. That's why everybody says, "I don't mean it. Can't you take a joke?"

Several youth told us that bullying behavior came from both older and younger youth, popular youth, siblings, family members, adults and teachers. Older youth talked about experiencing bullying when they were younger, but said it decreased as they got older. This was either because the one doing the bullying dropped out of school or they were better able to defend themselves with some youth stating,

The older kids bother...like Grade 7. They'll fight you. And they'll tease you. This one kid chased me. He's big.

I hear many people wanting to take their lives, because everyone even teachers bring them down.

Yeah, the people that used to pick on us, we were younger back then, but as we got older they tend to have dropped out one by one as we got older. It became less of a problem when they weren't around.

It's mostly verbal/social media bullying. Most of these people that are answering "no" [when asked if bullying was an issue in their community] are part of the popular squad. They are the ones bullying. They don't know what it's like to be us.

An overwhelming number of youth cited cyberbullying or bullying on social media and texting as a contributing factor to youth taking their lives. Youth identified Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter as social media that youth typically use and felt that cyberbullying occurred mostly among female youth. Rumours or other forms of harassment such as lies, ridicule and threats posted on Facebook and Snapchat were also reported by youth as bullying behaviour. Some youth referred to ***"Snapchat drama"*** where pictures of youth are photoshopped to look ugly and posted on their Snapchat stories. Other youth described that,

Getting bullied online and they [youth] think they're not important.

It's just like harassing, like "you should kill yourself".

Like, on their story they'll say something about another person. It will keep on going and going and going and going.

Many youth described feeling hurt and sad because of bullying or when their life is misrepresented on social media for their whole community to witness. Youth also suggested that another consequence of bullying is self-harming behavior, mainly by female youth. Youth told us that they may respond by isolating themselves in the community such as not attending school. As one youth explained, ***I have a friend going through a lot of bullying, thinks [that is] why not going to school.*** Other youth said,

[...] like when I am playing with some bigger kids outside and they start teasing me about stuff, it kind of gets me down.

[...] your friends saying you're fat and making them sad.

[...] sad, then depressed and probably, that's when the suicide will probably start coming.

Many youth said that bullying can be based on physical characteristics or on perceived differences, such as a young person's sexuality or how they dress. One youth described that, ***everybody thinks he's different [which] may leave youth feeling worthless, depressed or bad about themselves.*** One youth stated,

I've been bullied a lot growing up. Not more so now. But back in junior high, I dealt with a lot of people just for the way I looked and just for being me. And then when I came out in Grade 9, it was like a whole new world and I was like one of the first outed people, like out people in the school. I had not only eyes, but I had people talk down to me, say rude things to me and try to talk about me like they were me.

Other youth described similar experiences, stating,

I feel like gays are bullied more, like a lot more than lesbians... that's a huge problem.

For being different. Ummm yeah, I mean in my life I was ridiculed for my hair.

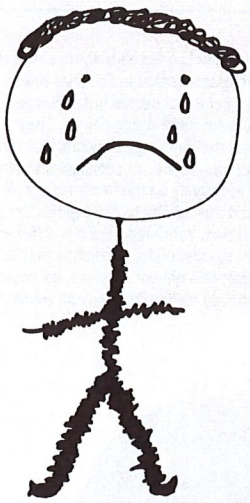
Being bullied, getting called down about how they look, or maybe they feel alone and worthless. Maybe they feel like they ain't loved or don't belong.

And people who don't know the real you, but still choose to put you down.

Several youth stated that it's not easy to tell adults or teachers because they minimize or ignore their concerns. One youth explained, ***if you are actually feeling sad and you tell someone, they all say that you're seeking for attention, which then brings you down further.***

Many youth also spoke of the difficulties they experienced when reaching out for help. They said that it's not easy to tell adults because this can result in being labelled as snitches or even retaliation where, ***[...]they [bullies] will come at you twenty times harder.*** They also said it could cause conflict between families. For instance, one youth said, ***[t]hey won't do nothing. They'll just end up arguing. That will start a bigger war.***

> ***[...] sad, then depressed and probably, that's when the suicide will probably start coming.***



YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: STOP BULLYING!

" *No bullying at all to anyone at anytime* "

Children and youth have a right to be safe from the emotional and physical harm that results from bullying behavior. Many young people identified ending bullying as a direct way to prevent suicide stating,

Stop bullying at school.

Not bullying.

I wish there were no bullying.

Stop bullying.

The youth identified some ways in which this could be achieved – both to prevent bullying from occurring in the first place and to deal with it if it occurs.

EDUCATE ADULTS, PARENTS, YOUTH AND COMMUNITIES ON BULLYING

Some youth suggested educating adults not to fear or dislike people for being different so that children would not be exposed to these biases. One youth described, ***when you are talking about youth being bullies [...] that's probably learned from somewhere. Because youth don't just come up with those things themselves.*** To address this, youth suggested,

> **Talking to the adults.**

Educating, basically. Cause it usually stems from not knowing. When you don't know something, you usually [...] dislike or you're scared of it.

Some suggested education for adults could also include descriptions of what youth actually experience, so that the adults understand what the youth is going through and can have discussions with their own children about bullying telling us that,

> **Parents need to talk to their kids about bullying.**

The chief could probably have, like, parents go to the high school and have a meeting that no kids allowed in that they talk about the bullying or if they don't tell their kids to stop bullying their gonna ban bullying.

Another youth suggested a community meeting where multiple youth go on stage to tell the adults about what they face. He said, ***[i]f one youth does it on their own, they probably won't listen. [In this way, they] could get the adults to listen to the youth in that area.***

In addition, it was recommended that there be more education for youth, including awareness of the consequences of bullying. Opportunities for youth to talk with peers about what they are experiencing and how they, themselves, might be participating in bullying was also mentioned.

Other youth reported the importance of being kind, stating,

> **Be kind to one another. Not being so judgmental. Like calling someone ugly – or the way they talk/sit/run/ etc. – or judging their style.**

Youth need to be friendly and kind to each other.

> ***Peace, Love and Kindness go a long way.***
> ***- Youth Participant, Ignite the life***

TAKE ACTION WHEN BULLYING IS WITNESSED OR REPORTED

When asked how we can stop bullying from happening, the majority of youth said it was important to tell someone – teachers, school staff, parents, police, friends, or counsellors – and to not deal with it alone. Some youth stated,

I think, like, the...the main thing for victims of bullying is to, like, never retaliate. Like, just to know that it's okay to tell someone about it and it's not 'ratting out'. If you feel unsafe or, like, people are like bugging you, bullying you, like, it's okay to go and tell someone about it. You're not being a rat or telling on them. Like, you're helping yourself and then things can actually get done about it. I know it's easier said than done, but, like, retaliating and not taking appropriate action leads...does lead to the suicide, and the depression, the anxiety and it just escalates into something more when it can be put to a stop.

> **Tell adults and the adults can talk to the youth who are doing it.**



However, young people also said that they needed these people to take them seriously and take action, stating,

> I think there should be more serious consequences. Like, I know the kids aren't going to go to jail for it, but, like, there needs to definitely be more... like, it needs to be taken seriously. Because when you bully someone you're, like, destroying them and, like, hurting them – emotionally and even physically.

Adults need to listen about bullying and take action.

Specifically, youth spoke of needing more intervention by teachers when they see bullying behavior occur or when students report it, and to implement serious consequences for students who are bullying others. Many youth told us that students often felt nothing was done if they told school staff they were being bullied. Some said this was because there were not enough teachers and the ones they had did not have time to address the issue. Others said they were not taken seriously because teachers played favourites, or simply would not listen, telling us,

> Hire a new teacher and punish [the] bullies.

> Told the teacher, but nothing was done about it. Need to take action.

Youth indicated it is unfair that victims of bullying are forced to leave school as a result. They told us that removing the person doing the bullying from the situation is what should occur in these instances. As one youth explained,

[...] when you heard someone's being bullied, you move the kid away from the problem. No. It should be the bully that's moved. Because, like, when you hear of people being bullied so they have to leave and they have to be homeschooled, I don't think that's fair because it's the bully causing the problem. I feel they should be taken out of school for a while and, like, homeschooled [...].

As an example of how action by school staff can have a positive impact, one group of youth told us their school had surveyed students on their experiences of bullying. As a result, staff were starting to address bullying behavior, instead of ignoring or minimizing the issue. This group felt these steps were going a long way to improving the school environment for students.

Some youth further suggested that parents pay closer attention to their children's social media and make them delete any posts that are harmful to others, rather than allowing hurtful messages to be spread explaining,

> Youth should have their phone or tablet supervised by their parent(s) because you never know whose being told "to go kill themselves" or being the bully and saying that stuff to people.

Make them delete it when they see it. Whatever they've got.

Youth also asked that attention be paid to the person engaging in bullying behaviour, stating,

You can try and be nice to them [...].

[Ask them] "Hey, why are you doing this? Why do you feel the need to bully?"

> Talk to the person who is bullying, because it hurts them too. Or maybe they are going through something. Don't just talk to the person being bullied.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

"The impact of bullying is often under estimated and minimized."[33]

DEFINITION OF BULLYING

Bullying is a relationship issue where one person or group repeatedly uses power and aggression to control or intentionally hurt, harm or intimidate another person or group. It is often based on another person's appearance, abilities, culture, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity. Bullying can take many forms; physical, emotional, verbal, psychological or social. It can occur in person or through electronic communication.[34]

Both traditional and cyberbullying emerged as a strong theme that Indigenous youth report as being connected in some way to suicide amongst young people. They described that bullying behaviors, including the inappropriate use of social media, can impact negatively on their emotional well-being and their ability to develop healthy peer relationships. Youth reported it is difficult for them to exist under conditions that perpetuate this type of pressure, particularly when already feeling isolated and vulnerable.



The youth articulated their need to exist in a safe space and to have their concerns heard about what they need to address this issue. Ensuring that students, family and community are aware of the effects of bullying and protocols for dealing with it is critical for children and youth to feel reassured that someone is going to help them when they ask.

Considering the effects of bullying on children and youth in our province, there is an urgency in ensuring that schools, communities, and parents continue to actively engage in intervention and prevention efforts. Recent research tells us that bullying behavior continues to be a persistent issue with potentially harmful effects. For instance, the Student First Survey (2014) in Saskatchewan highlighted that "32% of elementary students and 15% of high school students reported that feeling unsafe at school impaired their ability to learn. Further, 45% of elementary school students and 30% of high school students indicated their education would be improved if the school provided a safe space to receive support around bullying".[35]

The 2016 Saskatchewan Alliance for Youth & Community Well-being Youth Health Survey[36] further emphasizes the scope of bullying in our province. For example, 65% of grade 7 to 12 students (almost 2 in 3) reported that they experienced at least one type of bullying (physical, verbal, social, cyber) in the last year, with 41% having faced some type of bullying in the last month. Female students were 9% more likely to have experienced both social and cyberbullying in the last year than male students.

Consistent with what youth in the North told us, the Kids Help Phone *Teens Talk 2016* Survey found that bullying is much more common among younger teens across Canada and decreases significantly in frequency as they get older (17% in grades 7 & 8, and 3% in grades 11 and 12).[37] The youth participating in our report spoke of the importance of having support from parents and friends when experiencing bullying. This is also consistent with the Kids Help Phone Survey, which found that 53% of youth were most likely to talk to a friend about bullying, 51% to their Mom, and 27% to their Dad.[38]

The Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights examined bullying in depth, and reported that while young people today are skilled in the usage of technology, they may not fully comprehend the impacts of that usage, or have the good judgement that is required to navigate the on-line world.[39] The Committee heard many concerns expressed over the need for more time spent in schools on developing healthy social skills and ethical behaviour as key for an optimal learning environment.[40]

Children and youth have the right to feel safe, secure and protected in order to thrive and grow to their full potential. All levels of governments, communities, adults, and parents have an important responsibility to take corrective action to ensure children are safe from the harm caused by bullying. Provincially, we know there's been initiatives established such as the Ministry of Education's *Action Plan to Address Bullying and Cyberbullying*, which "[...] proposed key actions that can be taken to provide students, families and schools with the knowledge, skills, resources and supports to help children and youth to feel safe and accepted at school, in their community and online."[41]

In addition, the Red Cross conducts training and awareness on bullying in northern Saskatchewan with the objective of getting youth to take ownership of their behavior and creating safety for themselves.[42] Community stakeholders in the North have also recently taken steps to educate youth about the need to be critical of information on social media and to make informed choices about how they use it.[43]

While these initiatives are important, youth still said bullying is a prevalent issue. If we listen carefully, Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan's North want more opportunities to be part of the conversations required to enhance a collective understanding about the reasons and impacts of bullying. Youth said that stopping bullying is important to their well-being, and may help to reduce thoughts of suicide and secure supportive bonds with their peers and promote success in school.

6.2 LACK OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

When you get left unseen

Youth identified a lack of emotional support as a factor to explain why youth think about or follow through with suicide. Many youth reported feeling invisible to their families and communities, feeling ignored at school and that losing loved ones, friends or relationships contributed to social isolation and loneliness.

NOT ENOUGH EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FROM FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Some youth pointed out that the youth's family largely determines the experiences, chances and opportunities that they will have in their life. While a number of youth indicated they felt supported by their families, they noted that some of their friends were neglected, stating,

> **I know I have a great mom, but I see a lot of people where the parents are just either not in the picture or they don't listen to the kid or they don't care for the kid.**

> **Personally, I feel like I receive a lot of support. Whether that support came from family or members of our community. Other people might not feel the same way as I do because of the families they come from, as harsh as that sounds.**

A significant number of youth also stated that youth may think about suicide due to ***family problems***. These problems can stem from parents drinking, family conflict or bad relationships with family members. Parental substance abuse can affect the family's ability to provide a nurturing environment for their children. For instance, children may not have their basic needs met, they may experience physical and emotional abuse or youth may be burdened with caring for their siblings. As youth explained,

[...] problems in the home is usually what it stems from. From like, what I've seen, a lot of the youth that are doing these crimes do come from pretty bad homes where either their parents are drinking or not home, or there's just people constantly in and out or there's people trying to sell drugs or there's people just not treating the home like a home.

> **If the family is always drinking, you have to keep your own siblings because they are gone all the time.**

> ***There's a lot of good Indigenous people, but our communities are so ill right now. Leaders aren't trying to put programming in for youth. Families are not hearing their kids. If you were never taught how to parent, how can you be a parent? For me, it's the youth, the home, and the community that needs to work.***
>
> ***- Elder***





Mostly family problems, I think, because a lot of families in [this community] are split, have conflict, and problems with alcohol.

Parents don't listen or care enough.

Many young people told us they do not count on their parents for emotional support for many reasons: fear of rejection or judgement, ridicule or having their feelings minimized. They stated that,

Maybe their parents or guardians tell them they're exaggerating.

For some kids, they don't go to their parents, or go to any other person because they don't feel comfortable talking about their feelings, 'cause they think that they'll be [the] laughing stock.

We youth need to feel loved. We need to feel like you guys support us. But we need you to understand we are scared of how you will react. We are scared of how you will feel if we tell you how we truly feel.

Youth also reported not reaching out to adults due to trust issues or other barriers such as youth not feeling comfortable talking about their feelings. Some youth said that asking for help can be hard because they ***don't want to bug no one,*** or because they ***feel stupid about what they feel.*** Youth also told us that sometimes adults don't recognize their emotional struggles because they hide their feelings, but the reality is they feel alone, and think that no one cares. Many youth described not feeling loved or wanted, or feeling lonely, stating,

[...] a lot of youth suffer in silence and often don't have the courage to ask for help and it often leads to suicidal thoughts.

When you think of so much things and you have too much things to talk about but you can't [...] because you are afraid they'll judge you or say something about you.

I think youth and kids in my community are thinking about taking their lives is because they feel unwanted, unloved or not cared for. That's how I feel sometimes [...].

Like you actually want someone to listen to you and you want to be happy. Like, people don't want to stay sad. They want to be happy. But they can't do that with all these people treating them like they're nothing, like they're useless and worthless. Like, they don't pay attention.

Many youth reported that while they have support from their families or friends, they do not feel supported in their community or don't feel like they belong, stating,

The adults in our community makes us feel smaller than we should be. They don't listen to the youth when our voices can be as powerful as theirs.

I see a couple of youth post on Facebook that they want to kill themselves. But people tell them to quit looking for attention.

[...] so many kids suffer in silence and post on social media and others take it as "they want attention" when really it's a cry for help. Youth that post about their problems wanna be heard and our community often ignores their cry for help.

People [parents, community leaders] don't really listen to us. Like, until something bad happens and then they start listening to us. People only care when it's too late here.

Maria Campbell, a Métis Elder from northern Saskatchewan, spoke of the need to celebrate the importance of Indigenous children while they are alive, rather than solely planning large funerals after their deaths. Prior to colonization, Maria advised that Indigenous people saw children as their most precious resource and treated them with great respect. However, the missionaries saw this as a flaw and tried to correct the "spoiling of children" through practices such as corporal punishment and the loss of cultural ceremonies celebrating children. She said that sadly Indigenous communities' greatest celebrations are now about dying, death and funerals and described this as "one of the great colonial gifts". She asked, "What kind of message does that give our children, especially if they have been made to feel they are useless, stupid and not worthy of anything. If they have been abused in every possible way and there is no safe place for them anywhere, which is where most of our kids are at today." Maria said communities can let children know they are special and that they are loved by holding traditional Indigenous ceremonies around important events such as birthing, naming, first tooth, walking out, first hunt, first preparation of food and celebrations of puberty. She said that life must be celebrated as "there is so much to celebrate".



These young people also stated the reasons people in the community may ignore or reject youth is because they do not understand suicide, anxiety and depression. One youth explained, ***[...] if they don't understand something, they kind of push it to the side.*** Community support may also be lacking due to stereotyping that occurs by adults that all youth are responsible for crimes or vandalism occurring in the community. As one youth described, ***sometimes we feel supported. Not all the time though because everyone discriminates and judges us on everything we do.***

Lastly, youth indicated there are not enough positive role models in the community. Some youth see themselves as filling this gap and taking the responsibility to be positive role models for their peers by living independently, pursuing their education or other opportunities for employment.

LACKING SUPPORTIVE PEERS

Many young people described that having no friends or being rejected from peers can be contributing factor to why youth are thinking about suicide. One youth stated, ***I think young people often feel sad and/or depressed because of a lack of friends to go out and do stuff with, which would lead to being alone and overthinking [...].***

Although youth reported that their peers are more accepting of youth of all gender identities as compared to the older generation, we heard that some gay and lesbian youth may not feel fully supported by their peers.

Youth also talked about trust being a barrier to establishing positive peer supports explaining,

> **Challenges I face as a youth in my community are finding the right people to be friends with because of a lot of bullying.**

Some friends can be fake and tell people about your secrets.

[...] you can't even turn to your "friends". They're all fake, and either way, they don't care.

[...] sometimes you meet the wrong people. Like, because they could go against you, or they could talk behind your back and all that.

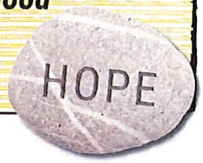
Other youth expressed concern with the negative influences that friends can have on each other telling us,

> **It's the friends that push their friends down silently, and they don't really know about it. [...] And there's no motivation with them. [...] And that comes from the kids that are smoking weed with their friends right now.**

Yeah, cause when you're three-years-old you don't really have friends that are going to influence you to do drugs. It's the family problems and you grow up with family problems and then you start becoming friends with [youth] who also have family problems and they understand. And then you're introduced to drugs and you're like "Hey, this helps".

I think a lot of the kids here in this town, like, they feel like they don't belong somewhere. So once they do find friends – even if they're negative friends – if they feel that belonging, then they stay with them. And just, like, once you have the belonging, and, like, even just a friend, even if they're not a great friend, then they'll stick with them and they'll start doing things that aren't good.

> ***Need to go through the steps of grieving. Otherwise, they go through to adulthood lost, lonely, isolated.***
> ***- Elder***



FEELING IGNORED AT SCHOOL

Some youth talked about a lack of support from the education system due to what they indicated as 'favouritism' of certain students, which may result in more opportunities or attention given to some students, while others feel pushed to the side stating,

The people in the school get supported like they get help with trips, and other people not as much.

School is hard when some teachers treat people differently.

> **A lot of favouritism, especially with people that work [...] in school too.**

Youth also mentioned the lack of support from teachers or principals who are too busy to help students work through their issues or listen to their concerns describing the following as part of the issue,

[...] being ignored in the school or community.

You can talk to the principals but like [...] They've already got a busy schedule, so that's only gonna add more to their plate [...].

The love and support just isn't there for them at home or even school. They carry that belief that they won't get better.

One youth reflected how the school does not take youth seriously when talking about suicide stating, ***once we say that word 'we're going to kill ourselves', they think it's a joke, but it's not a joke. I said that once to my teacher that I tried to kill myself.*** When asked if this youth felt he was taken seriously he replied, ***No. I could have ended my life.*** Youth also spoke of at times feeling bullied by teachers stating,

I hear many people wanting to take their lives, because everyone even teachers bring them down.

LOSS OF LOVED ONES AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to having limited support in the areas of family, community, peers and school, youth also discussed the hardship of losing parents, grandparents, extended family, friends and pets. Several young people reported feeling anxious or depressed resulting from losing somebody, especially if that person was very important in their lives telling us,

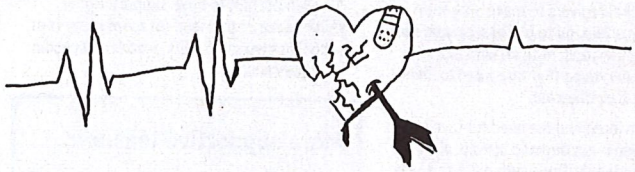
I think youth and kids in our community are taking their lives because they feel isolated, depressed and our community deals with a lot of loss.

When you lose someone you feel you could tell everything to and you feel like you have no one.

Sad because they have lost someone they really loved.

> **[...] say you're a youth and your one positive support in your life is your grandma and then she passes away. And then how are you going to cope?**

Youth also spoke of struggling with the pain or heartbreak that occurs when romantic relationships or love interests end or result in rejection. Additionally, the idea of growing up too fast and being too young for a romantic relationship was a concern for some youth who told us,





I don't like kids crushing over each other cause we're too young and the kids here act like teens saying bad words, playing bad games.

The youth also talked about the need to have ***understanding adults you can talk to about heartbreak – there's no professional you can talk to about that.***

Many youth said they had positive resources to help them in their community in times of loss. These include parents, extended family, grandparents and Elders, friends, Chiefs, therapists, and Preachers. One group of youth reported that grief camps are offered in their community where ***[...] people that go there have a feeling of a person they lost, and they can't get [over] the grief of losing that person. Because [...] they are going through the same thing [...].*** Unfortunately, many other youth described that when a family member or close friend passes away they feel like there is no support for them, ***[b]ecause they just expect you to get over it.***

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: INCREASE POSITIVE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IN THE COMMUNITY

"Someone to listen"

When youth were asked what was needed to prevent youth suicide, they identified positive emotional support from friends, family, school, community members, mental health professionals, Elders and even pets. Many young people simply told us having this support was important. Many others specifically said they need ***more support*** by having more people to talk to, to be there to help them, and to offer them care, comfort and kindness stating,

> **They need to know someone cares about them and that they can talk to someone.**

I think it is a community effort to support each other and just be kind.

CREATE FORUMS TO INCREASE MEANINGFUL PEER, FAMILY AND SCHOOL SUPPORT

Positive peer support was viewed by the youth to be most important. Having supportive, meaningful friendships was reported as being significant in diverting youth from thinking about suicide stating the following,

Hanging out with true friends and friends you can trust.

Not being bullied and have more friends.

> **They will need friends who love them a lot and who will show them that they don't need to take their life. Friends are really important.**

Friends also are someone you could talk to or someone to be there when you feel alone, talking to someone can just make you feel better by letting it out.

Youth also told us that they recognized the need for ***healthy relationships*** with peers and the importance of being able to tell the difference between people who are there to support them and others who are not indicating the need to,

> **Stop hanging around with the wrong people**

Make positive friends.

Distinguish the ones who put you down and the ones who put you up.

To show how even one positive friend can make a difference, one youth reported working through challenges with being accepted for his sexual orientation telling us,

[...] so by revolving myself around, like, my friend Amanda[45]and, like, you know, my family that do accept me, I feel comfortable in my own skin. I don't feel on edge and I don't feel like I have to worry about the littlest things.

The youth we met with also placed a great deal of importance on having positive emotional support from their family and home environments. Many stated that more of this support was needed to prevent suicide such as,

> **Need a healthy family, supporting adult figures, and have to be positive.**

More love from family.

> **Better support from family to fight their battles[...].**

> ***Need to put stuff in place for youth. Need healthy families. Need to understand how anxiety, depression and panic attacks can impact youth.***
> ***- Elder***



Youth and kids need the love and care first of all. My siblings didn't have the love and care they needed from the people they needed most, so they felt like no one cared or that they weren't as important than others.

A few others told us they wanted their parents to be present in their lives and to let them talk about their feelings when they have experienced a loss, instead of being expected to just ***get over it.*** Other youth told us they wanted ***guidelines*** or structure, from parents and caregivers to make sure they ***don't stay out late, go to bed at a certain time*** and eat healthy food, or to ***sit with them. Tell them everything that they need to know before you kick them out.***

Many youth identified the need for love in general, even if not directed specifically towards the family. One youth put it this way,

> **Youth need to know that they have someone they can turn to when times turn bad. They need to know that someone loves them and that suicide isn't the only option.**

Youth provided many ideas on how to improve the level of emotional support they receive at home focusing primarily on the need to help families overcome addictions. While less prevalent, other suggestions included making family counselling available, education on mental health and the ongoing impact of residential schools, more job opportunities, helping parents ***get out of trouble,*** having the school give parents a ***lecture,*** enhancing parenting skills, and encouraging ***quality time*** with children. As one youth stated,

Community events, family events, I guess. Things where people and friends can come together and communicate more.

Youth in more isolated locations we visited also asked for grocery stores in their communities or, if there was a grocery store, lower prices for fresh food indicating that this would help relieve some of the stress on their parents, by not having to travel up to three hours to buy food. One youth told us, ***they don't sell real food here. They just sell fast food. Like little snacks.*** Youth told us that less stress on their parents and ***better health food*** would make a positive impact on their lives.

School is another area where youth said it was important to have support. Some youth spoke of the need for ***more support*** at school in general. Others described specific examples such as,

> **More supportive teachers.**

Help and a more trustworthy environment in this school. And for teachers not to call the kids down.

> **Guidance [...] in terms of kids making it to class and actually participating...[...] Even if they [i.e. students] make it on time, it's just that they don't really take things serious during class. That's why the attendance is so low.**

Comfort from school...being able to understand what it actually feels like for them [when a youth has experienced a loss]. It would actually feel like someone cares and maybe...

On the other hand, we heard from one group of youth who noted a shift at their school saying they appreciated how,

The teachers are more understanding now. Instead of telling you not to skip, they ask you why you are skipping.

In addition to emotional support from school staff, more meaningful cultural activities in school was also mentioned as being important. In one community, youth asked for,

> **More Dene teachers for kids, teenagers, adults. [...] They would understand more students.**

They'll say we'll have a culture day [at school]. And they'll just go outside, cook some wieners, have some activities. [...] There's not really a traditional thing.

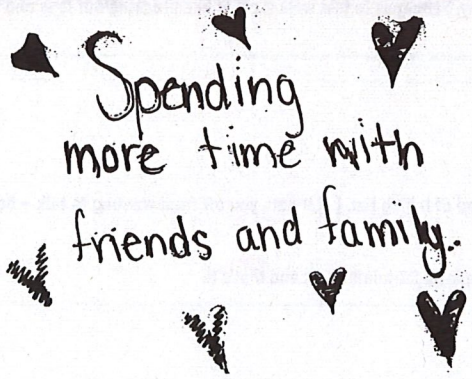
Youth in some communities asked for formal education on healthy relationships, telling us that,

There's really not much education for youth on how people are able to distinguish a healthy relationship from an abusive relationship, to signs of an abusive relationship and such.

> **Many kids just see what their parents or older role models go through and some of those relationships aren't, like, the healthiest but they think because "Oh, this is what their relationship is like, it's okay if he hits me too" or "it's okay if we swear at each other constantly". It's a really bad cycle.**

As a number of youth identified having ***food*** as necessary to improve their well-being, they told us that another way they could be supported at school was to have a breakfast and lunch program. Although many schools in the North do have these programs, youth in one community that does not said,

Sometimes we come to school and haven't had enough to eat. We need more food, snacks and juice.



> ***Schools are not teaching culture. Sure, they do a feast, but it's not enough. [...] we should be teaching them culture, environmental studies, science. Do things in the community, go into the bush and pick medicines. They should learn how to garden, how to live off the land.***
> ***- Elder***



PAY ATTENTION AND REACH OUT TO YOUTH

The youth have said they cannot continue to be invisible. They need friends, family, community, and school to pay ***attention*** to them – not just when they are in crisis, but every day stating,

> **He's getting attention now, finally getting attention.**

Youth need more attention from our community members and from their parents and some need a good talk with someone on a regular basis.

More time and affection given to kids.

> **Probably would need someone to talk to everyday.**

Even though many young people in the North identified having family, friends or others who love and care about them, some youth may not be aware of it. Youth told us, ***some of us feel alone. We feel unloved even if people do love us.*** A couple of youth suggested,

> **Adults should let youth know they are always there to talk to people – not just one adult, but many, like teachers, etc.**

Let her know that they're there for you [...] so she can be aware that they're there to help.

As we saw earlier, youth can have difficulty asking for help. Therefore, they want adults to ask them directly what is going on in their lives **and if they are doing okay,** telling us,

> **Youth and children need someone to talk to, and an easy less degrading way than asking for it.**

No one is doing enough, maybe supporters should go to everybody and ask instead of people just going to a supporter [...].

Ask, ask their children if they're O.K. be aware of the signs.

> **More support, someone to be there for them, just to check on them once and a while just so they don't feel alone.**

[Ask us] How we feel about ourselves and the reasons we are sad.

> **[Ask us] Are anyone of us suicidal? Do we need help? R we suffering? R any of us hiding? Are any of us trying to run from reality?**

Youth told us that it is important that people should be asking these questions to all young people – even if it does not look like they are struggling stating, ***adults should [know] that youth think a lot about suicide even young people who look happy it can be something they are hiding, and parents should always pay attention to their kid's feelings.***

> ***Adults are not taking it seriously. Families with children need to listen to why the youth want to [go through with suicide]. Something traumatic had to have happened to them.***
>
> ***- Elder***



SEE US, HEAR US - BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

If youth do feel supported enough to talk about their struggles, they told us that people must truly listen to them, try to understand where they are coming from, take them seriously and work with them to determine what kind of help they need. This was a theme in every community we visited.

LISTEN!

Like, actually letting someone express their feelings and not being interrupting of them when they're trying to tell you what's going on. [...] Listen and pay attention.

Someone who will sit and listen. To not be judged by the same person who would listen.

Let people listen to you. Don't let them diss what you're trying to say. Because it's happened a lot of times.

UNDERSTAND!

[...] when the adult was a teenager, it was a different time, which makes it hard to understand. So it's hard to talk to an adult when they have a different sense of...sense of mind to the problem.

[Adults need] to understand that kids and teens can have problems too and for them to understand that the problems are valid.

[Adults need] to try their absolute best to at least try to connect with them and/or sync with them on an equal level.

People need to stop confronting, do you think by telling the youth "You don't appreciate anything" is a good sort of talking to them?

TAKE US SERIOUSLY!

I'm not just going through a phase. It affects me daily. I need you not to get mad at me for it. I'm not looking for attention.

Parents actually listening to what their kids have to say -n- not take it as a joke.

Parents need to take these things seriously and not say things like "you'll be fine", "you're just tired". We need a trusted adult to talk to, someone that understands.

Don't turn your head. Address the problem.

It's not something we can just get over. You can't push it aside. We need help. Everyone is at risk of suicide.

Suicide is not being selfish, if someone wants to take their own life, they obviously have something very deep bothering them.

It's hard on a depressed/suicidal person to get up and face the day. Telling us to just walk it off is like breaking our legs and saying that. Everything we do is a struggle.

ASK US WHAT WE NEED!

Get to know people if you want to help them.

Ask [her] what she needs. Ask what kind of help she wants instead of telling her. [...] It puts you off from wanting to talk – being told what you want instead of asked what you want.

It's not easy to talk about, but if we do, we need help, not just one little 20-minute talk and that's it.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Youth placed significant importance on establishing deeper connections and relationships with their peers, family, school and community. Research has shown that these relationships act as a protective shield against suicide.[46] In general, a number of children and youth in the North need more emotional support in ALL these areas so they can return to their rightful place at the centre of their communities. Reflecting the need to have a strong network of support, one youth said it is necessary ***to get help from friends, parents, and Elders to get suicide out of their heads.***

The fact that youth are asking for family and home life to improve should not be a surprise considering what we know about how colonization and residential schools took away the opportunity for many Indigenous people to acquire positive parenting skills, and the opportunity to feel and express love. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission stated,

"Children exposed to strict and regimented discipline in the schools sometimes found it difficult to be loving parents."[47] Our colonial history continues to be a barrier to the nurturing by parents that today's Indigenous children and youth need to thrive and cope with life's ups and downs. For youth suicide to be addressed, young people told us they need more trust with friends and family in their lives to care for and love them.

With respect to the youth's call for positive family connections, the First Nations Information Governance Centre suggests that families may need some help themselves to develop these skills. It states that, "[i]t is important in addressing resiliency to suicide that families and parents are supported to help their children/youth when they have problems and to recognize signs and symptoms. Training for parents in this area and highlighting the importance of strong, open and communicative parental relationships with their youth is a key factor in building resiliency to suicidal ideation."[48]

BREAKING POINT – HOUSE OF COMMONS RECOMMENDATION

That the Government of Canada expand support for the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve and Urban and Northern Communities programs.

Regarding the need for a supportive school environment, the youth's calls for respect, caring and fair treatment by school staff, as well as to have more culture incorporated into the curriculum, were echoed by the youth who participated in the Student First Survey.[49] As a whole, these two initiatives show the important impact these steps would have on the well-being of young people and the potential to increase their level of engagement in school.

Youth also told us that suicide by youth is linked to the experience of grieving the loss of loved ones and romantic relationships. Pursuing love at a very young age when youth have not yet reached developmental milestones may make a break up emotionally distressing and hard to overcome. The British Columbia Representative for Children and Youth reviewed 89 suicide and self-harm incidents, and found that one-third of the youth had a "Significant romantic conflict in the 24-hour period leading to these incidents."[50] Children and youth who have experienced a significant loss in their life need support from their family or community to help them mourn, process and understand what they are going through.[51] However, this can be difficult when Indigenous families and communities themselves are struggling to overcome the collective loss and grief coming from their colonial and residential school experiences.

What is evident here is the youth's call for parents, adults, teachers, and communities to be attentive to the adversities youth face and support them in a meaningful way. Making improvements to benefit youth would be a major step towards youth feeling less invisible and more valued in their communities.

Indigenous people have lost their sense of belonging and love. This is due to residential schools, the 60s scoop, the foster care system, etc. [...] Residential schools were built like the jails were.
- Elder



6.3 THE IMPACT OF SUBSTANCE MISUSE

"Too much drugs and alcohol [are] being shown in our community"

Substance misuse was identified as a key theme by the youth as having a direct and indirect impact on their communities, families and themselves. Many youth described how use of alcohol or drugs is widespread in their community. These young people provided several reasons behind substance use by youth, including,

Nothing to do except drugs.

All my friends do drugs, alcohol, party.

Access to drugs and alcohol is too easy, especially for the youth.

Because most of the 40-year-olds and 30-year-olds today that are supposed to be teaching us not to do these things – they're the ones doing that stuff.

They're hurt. They want to numb it.

I was in pain inside and I didn't know how to control my anxiety attacks.

It's tough being a youth... there's kids who don't make great choices.

Everyone wants to fit in and think it's cool to do bad things.

Because they don't accept who they truly are.

Because this community is so isolated.

Youth also told us that drug use can be a barrier to education. Some explained that young people who come from neglectful family environments due to substance misuse often gravitate to peers from similar experiences and backgrounds. The path of drug or alcohol misuse can become a barrier to the confidence and motivation that youth need to achieve their education goals. This may result in youth developing a negative outlook for their future such as, ***Well, I don't care. I'm not going to make it that far.*** In one community, youth told us that their ability to focus on learning was impeded by students who are disrespectful or disruptive to the rest of the class. They acknowledged that this behavior is ***just a symptom of what they're going through.***

Many youth described alcohol and drug abuse as one of the underlying factors contributing to suicide stating,

Youth in my community face a lot of challenges, especially with drugs, alcohol and suicide.

[...] parents drinking. Lots of responsibility to parent siblings because their parents are not well.
- Elder



When youth in our community feel sad or depressed, they don't talk about their emotions and it builds up. They eventually turn to drugs, alcohol, or smoking.

Because people use it as a way to numb the pain. [...] A scapegoat [...] they're self-medicating.

Substance misuse by parents was also identified as contributing to youth suicide. Parental substance misuse was viewed as having a negative impact on the care provided to children, and compromising the ability to meet their basic needs. As one youth stated,

There's like a lot of people on the reserves, their parents drink and, [...] are with like drugs, they overuse those drugs and all. Then, [...] sometimes they don't have enough money to get groceries. And I would know, because my best friend is like that.

Many youth described how some family members may be involved in the drug trade to support and provide for the needs of the family. Others talked about how young children are influenced by what they are observing in the home. As one youth explained,

Kids learn at quite a young age and then they start applying it into their lives.

Most of the adults are drug dealers or alcohol really affects them, then they willingly give them [kids] the alcohol.

Young people reported that when parents misuse substances, youth can become sad, depressed, or angry and may develop trust issues, stating,

[S]ometimes their parents drink so much they just get sad and sad.

Youth reported they sometimes felt unsafe in their community in certain areas or public spaces where adults consumed alcohol and drugs. Other youth said they witnessed violence and people getting beat up due to substance use. Youth also described having a negative perception of their community, in part, due to the presence of intoxicated people. One 10 year-old-girl offered her thoughts about the place in her community where liquor is sold stating, ***I think of rhinos and they're gonna run us over when we're driving. They're gonna run after us with their big horns.***

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: ADDRESS DRUGS AND ALCOHOL IN OUR COMMUNITIES

" I wish there were no drugs and alcohol "

In the majority of communities we visited, youth identified that addressing the problem of drug and alcohol misuse – by both adults and youth – would make things better for them stating,

Making a difference for the youth by stopping drug use.

Not being bullied and have more friends and not around drunks.

Less drugs and alcohol.

And the biggest challenge is to give everyone the strength to take a stand for our community to be drug free.

INCREASED SUPPORTS FOR ADULTS AND COMMUNITIES

Many youth indicated that helping parents and families overcome addiction was the first step in making it possible for them to provide positive support, adequate food and meet the other needs they have identified. When asked what was needed.

First, you have to help them [parents] with their drug and alcohol addiction.

Something that makes you happy. Like maybe healthy parents.

She got a mom that stopped doing drugs.

No drinking fighting in the home.

Just maybe his parents stopped drinking.

We were told that if families and community members could address substance misuse, youth would feel safer at home and in the community and that relationships and trust with parents would improve.

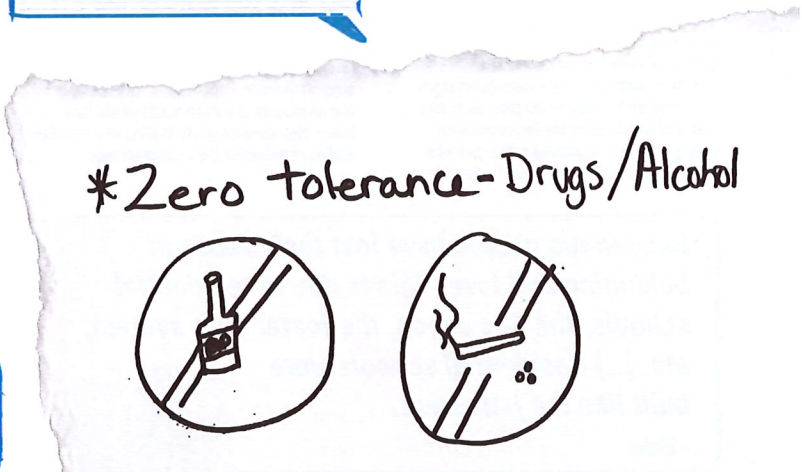
When asked for their ideas on how to address this issue, many youth offered some specific suggestions such as the need to convince their parents to go to rehabilitation centres, or to have more local treatment options that include the whole family stating,

The only thing I can think about is just rehab, but other than that, I don't know. Or, they could use a family program...like a family goes to this one program to talk how...like a family therapist I should say.

Family supports to help parents stop drinking.

[T]here's, like, a 10-day detox program here. But I've heard that's been pretty ineffective and it doesn't help a lot of people, like from their...like, they've been through it and they said it didn't really help them at all. So they'd have to just go down South, like, for people that want to go that could be hard and, like, expensive too. Like travelling and if you have kids, you can't bring your kids over there.

Especially if you're going to a place you don't live in and you have no supports there, you don't have family.



Some youth suggested eliminating the sources of drugs and alcohol in their community, or making it harder to access stating,

Throw the alcohol away.

Close drug stores/alcohol stores.

[...] make them illegal.

Go to the bars and complain about the age of alcohol, like, put it up to 25 to 30 so Elders can drink instead of us, like, teenagers.

Don't sell drugs to little kids.

Why do they support having a bar here? Alcohol is a big reason for suicide in all ages whether it separates the family or makes the adult go completely insane and abuse their kids or loved ones. So why? Aren't we trying to stop suicide in our community?

Other youth felt that more meaningful work for adults in the community would help families overcome addictions telling us,

More job opportunities - there's nothing to do in [our community] but drugs.

There should be simple jobs for the community to earn money instead of hoping to get a job in front of the cashier or stocking shelves of supplies, simple jobs many other people can do for the community.

Youth also suggested specific employment opportunities for adults that are needed in some communities, such as night security, SARCAN (recycling depot), music programs, gyms, recreation centres, or a fish plant. However, a number of youth also stated that that more jobs alone would not solve the problem unless adults were healthy enough to work stating,

People with addictions can only overcome addictions when they're willing to. Most cases, people aren't wiling to get over their addictions, because that's the only way they know or they're not willing to put in the work to get over it.

You can have the jobs and that, it's just the town that has to want that for themselves.

Yeah. Because, you can throw out all you want, you know, all the opportunities you want, it's gonna slip...it's gonna pass by. I mean it will pass right by them. And they won't even realize it because they are too focused on something else.

To help adults get to a place where they are ready to address addictions, some youth suggested educating them on the impacts of drug and alcohol misuse, as well as on the continuing impact of residential schools and how this contributes to current substance misuse, telling us,

If you want to help youth, you have to help the older people. Because there is still so much going on from residential school. The biggest and scariest gang started from residential school cash. You give a drug dealer $100K, what are they going to do with it? Drugs, guns and vodka. This town changed in the last few years.

I would think just educating, not only our youth, but the adults in this community. [...] How they are supposed to be our, you know, role models, but we're the ones being the role models. We're the ones using our peers as examples instead of using people who are older than us as us as examples like we're supposed to [...]. A lot of youth are, you know, working, going to school, getting their own vehicles, looking for their own places. A lot of them are under the age of 18 and they're doing this. But then you have 30-year-olds, 40-year-olds, even 50-year-olds, who are walking around the street, no money, drinking their life away. And there's just because of un-education. We just need to be more open-minded and educated if we want to improve this community. [...] A lot of our Elders and older adults in this community either had family members that were in residential schools or were in residential schools themselves. And the effects from that are...you can still see them today. And nothing's been done about it – except give them money which only makes the problem worse, so they have more money to drink and do drugs and [...].



Some youth also told us they would like to see a better police response to individuals in their communities who use, make or sell hard drugs, suggesting not enough is being done. Several youth told us,

Bust the dealers. And then kids won't grow up in fear.

Arrest the dealers.

The police here don't do nothing. Like, there's this case of our next door neighbours. They've been on that case for like 6 years and they're not even done. [...] And there's like...hard core druggies going to that house to sell cocaine.

Police should do a better job. [...] They could patrol at night. [...] There'd be less drugs.

So many families on the rez are into drugs. The police aren't doing anything about it.

Due to the Indian residential schools, we have lost most of our language, culture, and identity. Our community is fractured and lateral violence is the norm. Alcohol was a part of my life growing up, and violence and sexual abuse came with that.

- Youth Participant, Breaking Point – House of Commons Report

SUPPORTS FOR YOUTH

As alcohol misuse was specifically identified by the youth as contributing to suicidal behaviour, youth told us that young people ***need a place to go to keep them clean.*** Many told us that young people need to stop using alcohol and drugs so that they can succeed in school, focus on their goals and get to where they want to go in life stating,

Youth need to stop following bad paths that lead to being alcoholics or addicted to drugs and focus on school and their future and goals they want to achieve.

She's going to school and stopped getting high.

They need to hang out with the right people, stay away from alcohol/drugs and stay in school.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The importance of the youth call to action to address alcohol and drug misuse cannot be overstated. Their concerns have also been echoed by northern Saskatchewan youth in other recent forums.[52] [53] [54] [55] This is not surprising, as substance abuse in a youth's home is included among the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) shown to negatively impact their well-being and contribute to suicide.[56] It is also widely noted that substance misuse by youth generally is a significant risk factor for suicidal ideation, attempted suicide and completed suicide. [57] Recent research by the Kids Help Phone *Teens Talk 2016* survey, found that 23% of Canadian youth who had seriously considered suicide also experienced addictions to alcohol or drugs.

The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) reports there are several ways substance use could be problematic in escalating a youth's risk of suicide. For instance, individuals who are experiencing a depressed mood may be more likely to self-medicate using alcohol or drugs. Substances may reduce inhibitions and increase impulsivity leading to risk-taking behavior, and/or may be used purposefully prior to a suicide attempt to decrease feelings of fear related to the action.[58]

The CCSA puts forward a number of suggestions for approaches to prevention that reflect the solutions identified by the youth in northern Saskatchewan. With respect to improving services to young people, the CCSA recommended increasing awareness among healthcare providers about the link between substance misuse and suicide risk, as well as how to identify and address the signs of both. This would include having primary care providers routinely assess adolescents for risk factors on suicide, including substance use.

Youth spoke of having structured ways to ban or limit substances in their communities. The CCSA also suggests examining policies around their regulation that may have the same effect. The provincial government and the Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority have taken some steps, such as setting higher prices for liquor with higher alcohol content and working with northern leaders to increase awareness of positive alcohol consumption.[59] Communities must find ways to address this issue that work for them, but our office strongly encourages all parties to consider the perspectives of youth when coming to decisions in this regard.

Even with the steps that have been taken, more is still needed to help families with addiction. The connection between substance misuse in Indigenous populations and the legacy of colonialism, re-settlement and residential schools has been made time and time again. This damage is compounded for the people of northern Saskatchewan by the lack of adequate services equipped to help them. The provincial government's 2014 *Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan* identified the struggles people in northern Saskatchewan – including youth – face in accessing addictions services, stating that in-patient and detox addictions treatment services were of particular concern. The need to travel alone for long distances to access treatment can result in difficulties transitioning back to one's home community.

Take a tree. Rip it out by its roots and transplant it. Build four walls around it, and pour alcohol over it every day. That's what happened to us, and we won't survive. We'll wilt and die.

- Youth Participant, Breaking Point – House of Commons Report

There have been calls for the federal government to provide sustainable funding for culturally appropriate infrastructure and programming to address substance abuse issues in Indigenous communities. These have included the need for holistic healing centres to confront the physical, mental emotional and spiritual harms caused by residential schools.[60] [61] Provincially, to address the need for culturally responsive mental health and addictions services in the North, northern Saskatchewan communities are currently advocating with the provincial and federal governments for the creation of a holistic wellness centre.[62] The development of this facility has the potential to meet a number of the calls to action by youth presented here.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION CALL TO ACTION:

We call upon the federal government to provide sustainable funding for existing and new Aboriginal healing centres to address the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual harms caused by residential schools, and to ensure that the funding of healing centres in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories is a priority.

Additionally, the youth's call for employment opportunities to help strengthen their families is reinforced by Indigenous youth across Canada, as well as by the House of Commons Standing Committee.[63] It is that having a meaningful role in a community and a way of supporting oneself and family is a protective factor against many risky behaviours, including substance abuse.[64] However, to do so, we must first invest in building the necessary infrastructure in isolated communities to support these efforts.

BREAKING POINT – HOUSE OF COMMONS RECOMMENDATION

That the Government of Canada, in partnership with provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments, recognize the fundamental role of economic development and job creation in advancing Indigenous-specific youth suicide prevention strategies.

6.4 LACK OF PHYSICAL SAFETY

"It's not always safe [...]"

In the theme on substance use, the views of some youth were introduced regarding not feeling safe in the community at times when adults were intoxicated. In relation to these statements, it also became evident that the youth's concerns around safety were larger in scope.

Several youth described a range of reasons why they might not always feel safe in their community that include,

- Dangerous people who steal personal property or beat people up
- Threat of dogs or being chased by dogs
- Serious crimes occurring such as homicide, and assaults against children

Some youth described experiences where their personal safety was threatened while being out in the community,

> Well, one time, when I was walking, this drunk guy just jumped [...] just got this thing, pulled out a sling shot and just hit at all four of my friends.

They walk on the street and if you haven't done ... do what they say, you get beat up.

There's a lot of little boys that jump people in their 30s and 20s.

According to many youth, feeling safe was dependent on where youth lived in the community. Additionally, in some communities, female youth reported feeling unsafe even though it was not a concern for male youth. We heard that issues around physical safety can result in spending more time at home, not socializing with other youth and ***[j]ust having that fear behind you that you don't know for sure that you're safe.***

The ability to rely on extended family in situations where youth felt unsafe in their home was identified by many youth. Yet, several youth spoke of having nowhere to go in emergency situations that they can access on their own. For example, if their placements break down, they do not feel physically safe, there is substance use in their home, their needs are not being met or their caregivers are not present, they told us,

There's no emergency safe house for children in crisis.

> Guys struggle a lot more in this town than girls because girls have the women's shelter. There's nothing for guys. They have to be tough.

There's a women's shelter but [...] You have to...you have to be 18. And you have like...it's like a process. Like, you don't just go there. I mean, I'm sure if you knocked on the door, like, they're not gonna say no. Like, they'll probably call the RCMP or something, but they won't just like take you in. Like, there's a set amount of rooms and they, like, get set up like with their reference workers or whatever.

> ***You have to listen to them and hear their story. It's the community that needs to come forward. It's the leaders that need to provide safe places for the kids to do recreational activities, come together and talk and be kids.***
>
> ***- Elder***



YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: KEEP US SAFE!

"Better protection services"

More security in the town, in general, was identified by youth as being needed in a number of communities we visited. Specifically, young people were asking for improved security in the places where fights or drug use are most likely to occur. Some youth asked for night security and quicker response times by police stating,

Night patrol, stop gang violence.

> Yards, fences [...] so people wouldn't steal from your yard.

They [the police] show up like two hours later, an hour later. [...] They'll do something about it. They'll try. But last minute, people who had the two problems will be like "Ah, it's okay now."

In order for youth to have independent access to a safe place when needed, they suggested,

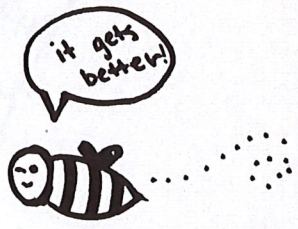
If your guardians are drinking, there's no places for kids to go, like a safe place. Like maybe if they extended this [i.e. youth centre], for little emergency rooms. There's a lot of space in town where they could make more buildings.

I feel, like, maybe, like, a shelter where they can run to. Like sometimes kids in the community they get kicked out of the house. They're like 10 years old. It's - 30. Their parents are drunk out of their minds. Their parents are beating on them and they have absolutely nowhere to run to. So where do they go when it's - 30 out and it's 10:00 at night or 3:00 in the morning? It's like they don't have a place to run to. A place that they can trust.

> Like a place to go if you're mom's out of town. Like, to go stay for the night.

Make a building for youth to go talk to someone and so they can be safe.

> What if a kid doesn't want to be here anymore? They don't have access to food, they need someplace to go, like a kid's hotel.



WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Communities everywhere are affected by violence. However, the experiences described above are in line with statistical data indicating that crime rates are higher in northern Saskatchewan than both the rest of the of the province and other northern provincial regions across Canada.[65] This situation is reflective of the unique dynamics and colonial history of northern Saskatchewan.

There is an obligation on government and community leaders to guarantee the right of children and youth to be safe by developing services and social programs that provide them with the support they need.[66] The youth in the North are telling us that they need safe communities where they are free to experience their childhood without fear. Violence is often seen as the sole responsibility of the justice system. However, due to its impacts on physical and mental health, the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared violence a 'worldwide leading public health problem' and there is a movement towards making it a priority of the health sector as well.[67] To truly address this issue, the traumas created by historical inequities need to be addressed to help lead individuals and communities to a state of wellness. Fully implementing the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission would be a step in the right direction.

The youth's call for a crisis centre accessible to youth was also identified by communities who spoke to the House of Commons Standing Committee. Speaking to the Committee, Lawrence Kirmayer, a prominent researcher and professor on cultural psychology and mental health of Indigenous peoples, stated,

"It was possible not only to give them [youth] some support there [crisis centre] but to bring in the family and talk to the family and try to defuse the crisis in some way. Therefore, there is potential to do much more good and, moreover, to have a positive intervention that would have a spill over or ripple-outward effect in the community, as opposed to simply taking the child out of the community"[68]

The Committee's report supports the youth's call to action in this regard, as it recommended the federal government support Indigenous communities by developing emergency centres accessible outside of regular business hours and, specifically, by creating safe spaces for youth and families in crisis.

BREAKING POINT – HOUSE OF COMMONS RECOMMENDATION

That the Government of Canada support Indigenous communities to ensure resources be available after hours and on weekends when emergencies typically occur, with special attention paid to the needs of youth directly or indirectly affected by suicide.

That the Government of Canada makes available safe spaces to support youth and their families in case of crisis to ensure youth can recover from distress or suicide attempts.



6.5 LACK OF ACTIVITIES

> *"There's really nothing to do here"*

As previously highlighted, many youth acknowledged the positive aspects of living in a northern community that contribute to their well-being. Some of the communities we visited have lots of activities available for youth, while others had very little. Many youth reported that there are not enough youth-based activities for all ages. In general, youth indicated that they enjoyed being able to participate in sports, but the situation for youth who are not interested in sports may be less than favourable, with one youth stating,

> **I face not having enough to do. For the kids that don't play sports it's hard to do anything.**

Youth told us, ***if there is nothing else to do around the rez, they usually get high, or sit on their phone.*** Some youth explained that the boredom and lack of meaningful opportunities can be depressing.

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: PROVIDE MEANINGFUL AND DIVERSE ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH

> *"Keep us busy"*

In every community we visited, youth told us that to help address the risk of suicide, they need to have ***something to do.*** Many youth identified ***being active*** as an effective coping strategy to deal with issues that may be weighing on their minds stating,

Youth need distractions I think. Whenever I feel sad about life I just focus on something bigger than myself and then I can't remember why I was sad in the first place. It works for me so it may work for somebody else.

Being active. Because the more he stays inside, the more he will probably think about the sadness and everything...the suicide. Because you've got to keep your mind busy [...].

> ***The biggest thing with the youth is to have a sense of belonging and having good, clean fun.***
>
> ***- Elder***



MORE ACTIVITIES NEEDED

Some youth told us that participating in activities also had other benefits, such as helping them to build positive peer relationships and develop skills. However, in order for youth to engage in activities, they must first be **available** and **accessible.** Even if there are activities available in a community, they may be inaccessible to youth who do not have the necessary means to pay for entry fees or equipment, or someone able to take them out on the land. Additionally, many youth told us their communities needed ***more activities*** for youth to participate in stating,

> **We need more activities that everyone can do. Not just the "cool" kids, stuff everyone can do and enjoy.**

More activities to help bring people together.

Other youth identified a need to improve infrastructure related to recreational services in their communities, such as,

Build a bigger skate park for the kids [...] You don't find like people my age going there now. It's usually just like 10 or younger or something like that. [...] Yeah, there's just small ramps. To make it bigger would be more interesting, fun [for older youth].

Getting our arena fixed.

More community buildings to be improved so kids aren't stuck inside their house all day/stuck with their thoughts.

[Schools should] build more equipment to play on.

Other types of infrastructure related to recreation that were commonly referenced were a mall, movie theatre, arcade, or water park.

Youth in some communities also told us that activities need to be more accessible suggesting,

Recreational activities that are free. There are afterschool activities if you have money. [...] I think if you want support as a guy and you want to be in a group it's sports. But sports you need money or something, like hockey.

[More options for sporting activities, including] soccer, volleyball, make a basketball court, BMX biking, swimming pool, water sports, skiing, more sports tournaments [...].

More coaches. [...] There are barely any coaches to train us and coach us in sports.

Transportation [to and from activities].

Learn cultural things. [...] There is a culture camp, but that is only once a year.

Youth also talked about the need to have recreational options in addition to sports stating,

To help us we need more activities, stuff that kids who don't do sports can do. Such as dance, or drama, anything to keep us occupied. If we're occupied and making friends, we won't have time to be sad because we'll be having fun.

Chess teams and things like that – or board games.

Have more groups to do things. Like organized groups, don't have them here.

The need for activities for older youth was identified in a number of communities. Many youth told us they felt left out as facilities and programs were often geared towards younger children or adults. Other youth identified needing various technologies such as smart phones, laptops, tablets and Wi-Fi as a way of connecting with others.

Some youth also asked for opportunities to travel outside their community, either to address what was felt by many to be geographical isolation, to ***learn more things,*** or ***get away from the emotion, to get away from the drama [...].*** Other youth told us the following,

Lots more activities and programs. Maybe even do weekend trips or something.

More people (kids) allowed to leave town, not just the kids who are the best kids. It's either really bad kids who get to go so they'll smarten up, or the good kids get to go as a reward. It should be random.

I think they need to get out of the community and see the awesome world out like travel, museums, etc.

We heard that having youth centres or ***places for the youth to go and hang out*** was important. One group of youth expressed disappointment with a lack of action by a community to repair a broken-down facility, stating,

Well they told us that we are getting our... that building fixed – the youth centre. They said they were getting that fixed, but it doesn't seem like anything's happening.

However, the youth also explained that these centres must be healthy, supportive and welcoming environments for youth. In one community that has a youth centre, youth told us,

Places like this Drop in Centre... sometimes don't like it because of other people. There's bad kids who bully or their shoes get stolen or they damage [property].

Youth also asked for more job opportunities available for young people telling us,

They should give us summer jobs so we can have something to do in the summer.

A job would help yourself support yourself because you'd be making money and can get the stuff that you want. [Another youth added]: It would also help you keep busy and learn more skills.

Lastly, youth identified the need for more awareness of the activities that are available in their communities stating,

So I think it also comes down to finding healthier and safer outlets and safer things to do. [...] I think just them making it more aware and...them trying to get it...the word out, would help a lot. [...] Well, like with our school, they have all these TVs around. They could circulate it through the TVs. [...] They could say it on the radio. We have so many outlets for them to use that they're just not using.



WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT?

The insights of these youth show us that the potential harm caused by the absence of stimulating opportunities for young people can lead to increased vulnerability and must be addressed. We also heard that some youth may not feel like they can join in the activities that *are* offered – either because they do not have the means, the activity does not match their interests or skills, or the youth believe they don't fit in with other youth who are participating. The youth told us that communities must do more to ensure they feel valued, and to offer diverse options for activities so that everyone is included. This was also the second most cited solution by youth who participated in the Ignite the Life conference,[69] and was recognized by the youth who spoke to the House of Commons Standing Committee.[70] For example, the House of Commons report stated,

"During all of the youth roundtables held with Committee members, youth acknowledged the positive role that space to pursue healing and recreation activities plays in developing self-esteem, goals, confidence and pride in being an Indigenous person. Appropriate infrastructure and related programming is important in small communities, especially for some youth, where life at home may be difficult or unsafe."

Children and youth have a right to engage in recreational activities. Governments and community leaders have a corresponding obligation to "encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity."[71]

The importance of recreational opportunities for youth is supported by a wide array of research showing that involvement in structured school or community activities contributes to positive health.[72] [73] We saw earlier how much significance youth place on friends and peer relationships. Providing the space for youth to come together with peers for a common purpose may also be beneficial to those who told us they need to create authentic friendships.

However, not just any activities will do. They must be meaningful to the youth and/or the community. 'Meaningful engagement' has been defined as "an activity which promotes success, challenge, would be hard to give up, is believed to be important, and is experienced as fun."[74] It has been found "that having 'meaning' or a 'reason for living' – a regular activity to look forward to – may enhance the will to live in the face of other risk factors."[75]

There is also caution not to place too much focus on simply 'entertaining' youth at risk of suicide, as the preventive value of these initiatives is short-lived. It is also suggested that youth must be engaged in activities that provide them with a meaningful role in the community based on those that have been traditionally valued by Indigenous peoples. In this way, youth can view themselves as contributing to the community and develop a positive identity.[76]

Studies also support the youth's call to action for more than just sporting activities to be made available. Engagement in creative arts, such as music, film, dance, theatre, spoken word and literature, has the potential to help youth build resiliency, create relationships and initiate conversations about community change. This includes creative arts rooted in Indigenous culture.[77] The Aboriginal Healing Foundation states that "there is no separation among the arts, culture, and healing because they are interwoven into the fabric of life". [78] To assist communities in making such activities available, the First Nations Information Governance Centre has developed a list of cultural activities they say are known to contribute to resilience. This list can be found in their report titled *Youth Resilience and Protective Factors Associated with Suicide in First Nations Communities.*[79]

BREAKING POINT – HOUSE OF COMMONS RECOMMENDATION

That Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada increase funding to Indigenous communities for youth and community centres; and work with communities to provide sustainable culturally appropriate programming.

The House of Commons Standing Committee has also made a recommendation mirroring the youth's call to action for structural support in the area of recreation. The federal government has responded to those recommendations and committed funding to "support Indigenous youth and sport".[80] However, while sports have certainly been identified by many youth as being important to their well-being, there is a significant population of youth who are not well-served by a focus on sports alone. The youth have provided some examples of the types of activities they would like to see above. Still, it will be important for communities to engage directly with and listen to their youth to ensure any new initiatives fully meet their unique needs and interests, and are meaningful to them.

6.6 IMPACT ON EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL WELLNESS

Feeling like there's no future

What emerged from our discussions with the youth was their perception that many factors affect their emotional and mental well-being and the experience of multiple hardships can, ultimately, overload a youth's capacity to cope. Several youth identified past childhood trauma as a factor underlying why youth may be thinking about suicide. As one youth explained, ***[...] feeling alone, overwhelmed, or experiencing something traumatic can make them feel like suicide is the only way out.*** Many youth spoke of ***abuse*** as a factor related to suicide. They identified abuse in general, or specifically labelled it as physical, sexual, emotional or neglect. When asked to expand on what was meant by "abuse" – one youth responded,

That's all of that here.

Many youth reported that the emotional aftermath resulting from the hardships they experience can include sadness, hurt, fear, anger and loneliness. As one youth stated, ***she could also be in a state of sadness from a loss or fights with family.*** Youth reported feeling rejected by people who do not believe their emotions are real. Depression and anxiety were cited many times by youth as having a major impact on their mental well-being. One youth stated,

Depression. It's major, it's major in this community. I know a couple of people that suffer from it right now.

My parents were very heavily influenced by residential schools. Five of my siblings went, but the younger ones (including me) were spared. In my family and community, there was lots of sexual abuse, physical abuse and emotional abuse. We need to heal from that. Older siblings learned to abuse and would have passed it on to the younger ones if we didn't recognize it and stop it. That one family learned abuse, it's become a learned behavior that's been passed on from generation to generation.

- Elder



Other youth described how this overload on their emotional and mental capacity can be difficult to endure [ie. oppressive],

Things happen to a person and maybe they seem fine, but they stay strong so people around them don't worry about them. No one would expect you to do or think about it, but you do and having no one to talk to makes everything worst. Depression builds up and then you're stuck and don't know how to get out.

[...] I always had this big feeling, like you're trapped. A big weight on your shoulder and your heart. You're stuck. You don't know where to go after that. Then you start staying inside and you start building more depression onto you.

Suicide is what people think is the only answer. People are scared to get help because they feel that if they do they will be isolated. They feel unloved, worthless, and hopeless. They give up the war they were fighting.

Young people told us that if there is no resolution or they cannot talk to anyone, their problems can become insurmountable and very difficult to overcome. Youth reported that these instances can lead to feelings of hopelessness for the future stating,

[...] they might not see a future for themselves, and they do not want to live to see if they will.

They feel like life will never get better. They don't talk to anyone about it.

I think they just believe that because their current situation and where they're at and how they surround themselves with negativity, it's just constant crap to them. They can't handle it, so they start to believe that it's not going to get better. Hopelessness.

LACK OF SELF-ESTEEM AND INSECURITIES

Youth said negative perceptions of oneself caused insecurities and made youth vulnerable to suicide,

Not happy with their looks.

Maybe they don't like their body.

Self-hate in like body image and lack of talent.

Because his self-esteem went down 'cause of others.

[...] not happy with the way she is.

Don't like themselves.

Confusion in oneself.

Socially awkward.

Insecure.

One youth explained how he overcame thoughts about suicide at a crucial point in his life,

I considered suicide too, because [...] the stress of figuring out your sexuality and figuring out who you are – it eats at you. And, at times, that outlet looked a lot more better and comfortable, because where I was right at that moment, it wasn't fun. I didn't see a brighter future ahead. And it wasn't until I fully accepted myself when I realized that it doesn't matter what people say to me, or think of me. It's how I think of myself and how I treat myself is what's going to get me to that future I dream of. But not everybody has that type of capability of realizing that at such a young age. And I was fortunate enough to be able to, but I just wonder how many of us in this school can do that.

[...] people would say "this is reality" [...] is my depression reality? I'd like to think it's not but we all know that DEPRESSION is reality it's as real as getting up one day and finding out someone you love has passed away – depression – is not fun although people like to joke about it, they really don't know how it feels [...]

-15-year-old Youth



And, just like me I keep all my feelings bottled and I'm like flying until one day, like, you know, it's just like putting a rock in your back pack every time you bottle up a feeling and then one day it's just gonna burst and then, you know you have that break down one day and the next day you're totally fine like it didn't even happen.

Need to break the silence [...] there's shame, silence and stigma around that word. People don't want to share it. Families get labelled/ stigma for the thing their child is doing. So they keep it to themselves. Talking about it is the only way to get away from the stigma.

- Elder



NOT ENOUGH OR INADEQUATE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Some youth commented that there is a lack of available mental health services – especially in isolated communities – to meet the needs of the significant number of youth who are suffering with anxiety or depression, telling us,

> There's no professionals in town that you can talk to.

There's the clinic, but it closes at 5 p.m.

There's not family counselling at the clinic, it's just individual.

Other youth recognized there were services for youth who are suicidal. This includes the RCMP transporting youth to the hospital for a suicide assessment, however, based on the outcome of the assessment, youth may either be released or sent to a mental health centre in Prince Albert or Saskatoon. One group of youth stated that in some cases, medications can help stabilize an individual but that alone may not be enough, saying,

I think you can shove as many pills as you want down a kid's throat, it's not going to help the root of the problem. It's not going to help, like, the root that got them to that point. Like, yeah, medications I think can for sure help. But it's not for everyone and it does not fix the root problem. You're still going to have that problem with the meds you're on.

Youth told us that it can be difficult to connect in a meaningful way with counsellors because sometimes they focus on themselves and their experiences. In these situations, youth said they did not feel heard and questioned the ability of some counsellors to truly appreciate the issues faced by the current generation of youth.

Some youth voiced criticisms of the mental health services which they viewed as largely reactionary telling us,

They did have mental health nurses come in, though, when...at the time when we...like, when the northern communities were experiencing those suicides. But that was pretty much just temporary. [...] I think people didn't really know how to talk to them because, like, they didn't know them. Kind of just strangers. [...] like, I know my sister was friends with a couple of those girls and I don't think she opened up to them because she just, like, doesn't feel comfortable talking to strangers and that's like how a lot of people in the community are.

> Well, not only that, it's like, those girls needed the help beforehand. Not that...how many girls died, and then they send counsellors here for a couple weeks.

The suicides of youth in the North triggered additional mental health resources. However, youth reported that these supports came into the community too late when the youth that died may have needed the services long before the crisis occurred.

STIGMA ATTACHED TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

We also heard that youth face barriers to accessing conventional mental health services, because of the fear or stigma that are attached to such services. Some youth reported they may be unwilling to attend inpatient mental health treatment in the South based on misconceptions and the separation from their families. As one youth described, ***you don't know where you are [...] Like people think it's just like a place where crazies go [...].***

Youth also explained that parental fear may be a barrier for young people to access mental health services stating,

> I know youth who have gone to their parents and said, "I'm going to commit suicide," but the parents don't sign the [consent] form. All parents think it will show they did something wrong or what the child did wrong.

People don't want to do it, automatically assumes you're being abused or stuff's happening at home.

If the parents aren't educated, it's not going to benefit the youth. Like, oh God, I can't even count the times I've heard "you have no reason to be depressed, why are you sad?" And...I've also heard of parents denying kids the ability to go talk to someone professionally, because you need parental permission if you are under 18. [...] Yeah, parents would say "No, you can talk to us. Why are you upset?"

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: HELP US!

" More people willing to help "

NEED FOR COPING SKILLS

The youth identified that young people who are suicidal need to reach a different place mentally and emotionally. One of the ways to do this that stood out for many youth was having the ability to think more positively about themselves, others and their future. The need to focus on happy thoughts, instead of things that are sad was also mentioned by many youth who stated,

Don't hate appreciate.

Be more understanding of yourself and others, love yourself flaws and all.

> To think positive. To look at yourself in the mirror and tell yourself you are beautiful and you can do it.

To know that you are "everything".

> It's a bad day, not a bad life.

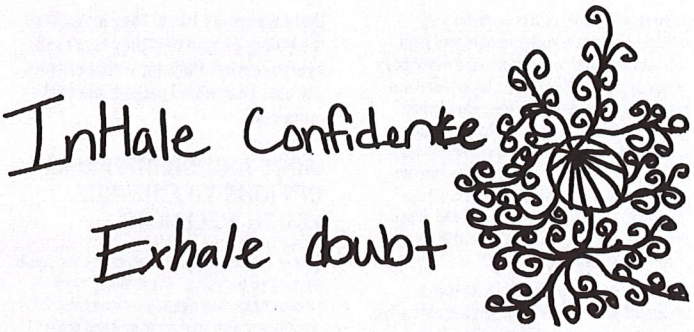
I feel as if I am crazy, I wake up thinking insane thoughts. In my head thoughts flew and to keep sane I kept telling myself those thoughts aren't true but for some reason the thoughts never seem to die...maybe if I die they will. [...] I'm feeling really anxious I have a feeling of lonesome and it won't leave

-16-year-old Youth

"Awasis" – means "child" in Cree, by meaning "a glow". A lot of children have lost that glow. They need to get that glow back. Children are supposed to be happy, fun-loving and living life.

- Elder





Everyone has to have a reason to want to live. You have to have motivation. You have to know they will make it. [...] I know I'll make it. It's knowing you're going to succeed.

They need to know that life will get better.

I think youth and kids need to thrive on their future so suicide does not occur. We need them to think of what they may want in life and what they can do to get it.

Focusing on education was identified by the youth in more than half the communities we visited as being important to achieving a better outlook for their future with some youth telling us,

You've got to go to school, get an education, figure out a career that you want and get out of this town.

Realize that education is key and that your "bros" aren't going to follow you on your goals, beliefs, motives.

Another strong message that came out of the youth discussions was the importance of young people having the courage to reach out to others, talk about their problems and **ask for help when they need it.** Many youth told us repeatedly that young people should always,

Seek out help from people you trust.

Ask for help.

Talk to each other.

Get HELP.

Tell somebody.

Talk about it.

You just have to call to make an appointment to talk to someone.

Spending time with loved ones.

Surround yourself with positivity/Be more social.

Be around their friends more often and talk to someone about how they feel.

Talk to a counsellor.

Talk to parents or friends.

Be around their friends more often and talk to someone about how they feel.

Phone Kids Help Phone.

To talk to someone who could help them and make them feel like they belong, maybe even talk to a friend, someone they trust.

Although these are all positive ways of coping with stressors, as we saw earlier, it can seem impossible for a young person who is struggling to get to an emotional place where they are able to think positively, focus on their future or reach out for help. We heard from youth that some young people may need substantial help to start turning things around.

Some youth asked specifically for education on healthy coping skills and assistance in finding out which way works the best for them. They told us this education is needed early because, ***coping skills are something that you learn ever since you're young. It's simple psychology. But...some people don't have the family or the support to teach them how to cope properly.*** Other youth explained,

There's so many different ways you can cope [...] in a positive way. And it's really all about what works for you. [...] like, just being aware that there's more than, like, a few ways to do that.

There should be more 'healing' options than just pills. [...] Any time I go in, they try to push pills on me. They should educate us on how many things there are that would help. Like music, art, creating music. My favourite thing is music. You play a song and it's how you feel.

INCREASED MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES IN THE COMMUNITY THAT MEET YOUTH NEEDS

Many youth told us they needed more professional support people available in their communities. In general, young people stated that they wanted, ***more counsellors out there*** and ***more people to talk to around the community.*** Youth identified several solutions that included having counsellors available to youth outside of regular school or clinic hours. One youth stated the need to have, ***somebody to talk to them at a time of need not only during the day, but maybe even a hotline that's open 24/7.*** Another youth told us that she most often felt down at night and that it was hard to describe how she was feeling to a counsellor the next day, stating, ***When I do get help, I don't feel like that. In the morning, I'm happy.***

Other youth asked for counsellors to stay in a community on a long-term basis so that relationships and trust can be built. Youth also asked for more counsellors, mental health therapists and Elders in schools. If schools do have these positions, we heard

Youth need opportunities to be proud of themselves, to dream. Many young women I work with have no hope or light in their eyes. They have no hope for the future.

- Elder



there is often only one counsellor and/or Elder for both the elementary and high schools and that their offices are ***often busy or not open.*** Youth told us they needed ***one person each to talk to in the schools*** and to ensure adequate access to counsellors for children ***in elementary school – that's when problems start – when little kids are suffering through abusive homes. Cause if you can't fix that problem as a kid, when you get older you're going to look for self-medication solutions.***

However, some youth also expressed concerns with a lack of confidentiality when speaking with community counsellors and said,

They should make it easier to talk to the people who are supposed to be there for support – like counsellors [...] If there was more trust. They should tell the young person that they won't tell everyone what they say – that it won't get out. That would make them feel more safe.

MORE AND/OR DIFFERENT OPTIONS TO ENHANCE YOUTH WELLNESS

Earlier in this report, it was said that youth wanted to be asked – not told – what kind of help they need. To make this possible, youth told us they ***need more options to voice how they feel*** in addition to conventional mental health counselling or medication and, ***more ways to talk to adults about tough situations where they won't be judged.*** A number of youth specifically asked for access to Elders and traditional Indigenous cultural activities or ceremonies as a way to heal. However, in some communities, youth told us they do not have these opportunities on a regular basis, stating,

I'm happy you're talking to young people. Ways of parenting, nurturing are different. We don't go to the teachings. We go to the psychologists who dope our kids up. Keep them from crying. Teaching them not to feel. We need to talk to our kids and help them through those things.

- Elder

NURTURE



We have our grandparents, we have Elders, but they're not there a lot for the youth. They're sick and stuff.

Positive energy, like spiritual, like smelling sweetgrass. Like access to sweats. [There's] not really access, only certain people can go. You can only do those things if your family does it or you know someone who does it.

Go up north, instead of down south. [...] They took girls from [our community] to Saskatoon. They should take them up north, get help for what they want to do.

Youth also asked for organized peer groups, such as wellness groups or support groups with other youth of the same age to allow them an opportunity to talk about how they feel, what they are experiencing and about issues that are important to them. We heard that there are often these types of groups for adults or young girls, but they are not typically offered for older youth. Some youth stated,

The students would feel more comfortable talking with, like, classmates and other peers instead of talking to somebody 20 or even 15 plus years older than them. Because how are somebody that...how is somebody who didn't grow up in this time going to understand a kid who's growing up in this time? Just like how can we understand how you guys grew up? So, it would make...it only makes sense to have youth [engaging] and getting involved in this and trying to help each other. Because it also creates, you know, a stronger friendship and a stronger community when we're trying to work together to make something better.

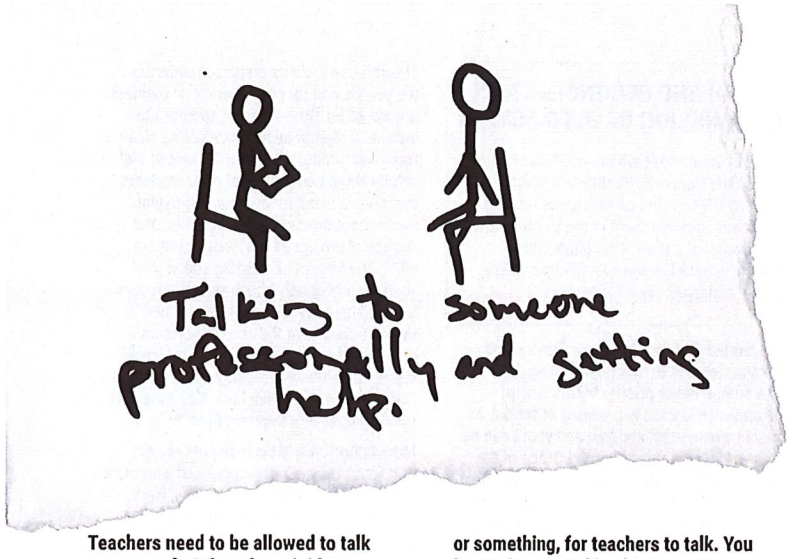
To have a after school program for people who feel sad – having a online program to talk to someone.

We could have group discussions – like therapy – with people you trust and who trust you.

SUICIDE AWARENESS EDUCATION

The youth told us they want to talk about suicide. The simple fact that 264 youth volunteered to participate in this project, and 450 youth attended the Ignite the Life Conference in February 2017, shows that the youth in the North are wanting to have a voice and take action to deal with this issue. Youth have told us they want to be asked directly about if they are doing okay and if they are thinking about suicide. Youth also told us they want to be given the opportunity to talk about how the risk factors they face may be impacting them.

Youth in one community expressed frustration about not being able to talk openly in school about their friends and classmates who died in the Fall of 2016. As one youth in this community said,



Teachers need to be allowed to talk more openly. When the suicides happened, they just said "a student passed away" [...]. That was the only thing they were allowed to say. The kids want to talk about it. They need to talk about it and the teachers – the ones they trust the most – don't talk about it.

Many youth specifically asked for suicide awareness education to be provided directly to young people telling us,

> Suicide awareness should be around all the time.

Proper early education is needed. [...] My 10-year-old brother is making jokes about suicide [...]. When you start understanding the world, you should be talked to.

> Do more conventions to make suicide more known. Not only suicide, but mental disorders, anxiety, depression, OCD, etc. make people know they're not the only ones suffering and they aren't alone.

The need for, like, the improvements of getting their peers to know more, be more aware. Teaching them to be more aware. Having a lesson in class or something, for teachers to talk. You know, that mental health first aid thing? We should have more of those programs.

> Youth don't like to talk to older people. I recommend teenagers to take the ASIST program.

Youth also needed to be educated in order to be aware when they themselves need help. They might not know, because they might think something is normal. [...] Or they might misdiagnose themselves.

> I feel that's something that every adult and youth should probably have.

Specifically, youth in a number of the communities we visited said it would be helpful to hear from someone who has experienced the same issues they may be facing – including suicidal thoughts – and has gotten through it. One youth explained it like this,

Someone who has an honest opinion about how they feel and what they've been through and tell them that there's actually hope in, like, feeling that way.

Many youth talked about how easy it is to see the signs of someone struggling, and how they want more people in their communities to know what to look for stating,

It is pretty easy to tell. You can tell by what they put on social media – Snapchat stories.

> Like, you definitely distance yourself from others. You kind of just keep to yourself. Like, you can just tell and sort of feel the, like, the negative energy in the air. And then...like, I don't really know how to tell an adult that. Like, just being more aware. [...] Like, recognizing the difference. [...] Because every teen is moody, but not every teen is severely depressed. And there's definitely, like, major signs. Like, you can tell the difference.

[...] the supporter should look for obvious signs, Ex: going to school with puffy eyes, kids' marks dropping, going to the washroom just to cry because they can't handle being around people for long.

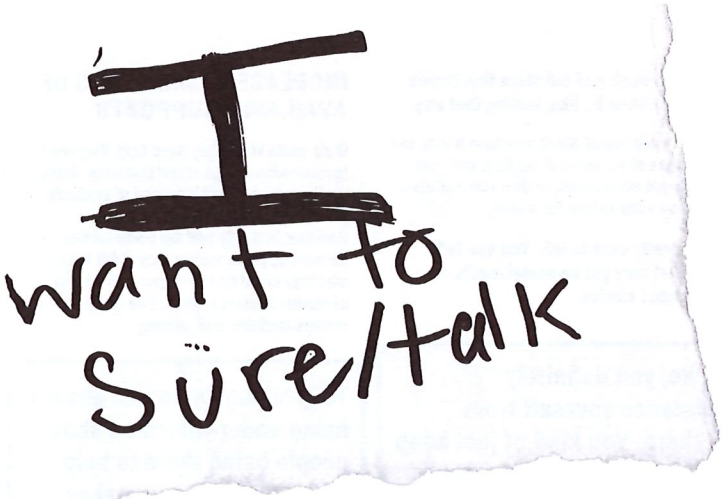
> I feel like maybe if more people could recognize those signs, that they could start at an early age. And, like, people could reach out to them and just kind of help them out early on.

INCREASED AWARENESS OF AVAILABLE SUPPORTS

Once youth know they need help, they need to know where to go to get that help. Some youth were very well-informed of available professional mental health supports. However, in nearly half the communities we went to youth told us they didn't know who they could go to – especially outside of regular business hours. One youth summarized this well, stating,

> To give you an honest answer, being under-informed about people being there to help you is kind of what makes it hard as a youth. Cause I didn't know I could go to [the community counsellor]. I didn't even know she was a counsellor until the first time I met her.

Some young people told us that ***adults should let people know that there is help and where they can find it.*** In every community we visited, there are available supports of some kind and some communities had even set up their own crisis hotlines, in addition to those already available through the Kids Help Phone, Saskatchewan Access Healthline – 811, or the First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line. However, the youth we spoke with were not always aware of these services. It was apparent that this information needs to be more widely available and accessible to youth in places that they are likely to see. Youth suggested putting up posters advertising the various local supports in their community or crisis and support hotlines, or finding better ways to make this information available to them via social media.[81]



WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

We asked the youth in the North why young people might be thinking about suicide, and many identified various adversities that threaten to overload their emotional and mental health. This situation can be compounded by having no future vision for themselves and a lack of positive self-image. The adversities the youth speak of are supported by the *Teens Talk 2016* survey, which found that, "[...] teens who experience issues with their body or self-image, or violence at school or home, are at least twice as likely to seriously consider suicide compared to the general teen population."[82]

The perspectives of the youth on the limitations of the mental health system illustrate that these services may be ill-equipped to meet what they say is required for optimal emotional and mental wellness. Youth told us it was important to broaden the availability of services, as well as counsellors, mental health therapists, and Elders in the community and the schools.

Youth value the Elders in their community and expressed a need to connect with them to learn about themselves through the Dene, Métis, Woodland or Plains Cree cultures. In fact, research supports that First Nations that are able to achieve cultural continuity - through self-government and preservation of culture – "[...] are dramatically more successful in insulating their youth against the risk of suicide."[83]

BREAKING POINT – HOUSE OF COMMONS RECOMMENDATION

That the Government of Canada implement a funding formula to provide long-term, predictable, stable funding to support the provision of mental health services for Indigenous peoples; and that the funding formula take into account population growth, inflation and remoteness.

The youth's call to action for increased suicide awareness education is supported by the World Health Organization, which has stated that increasing awareness and responsiveness to mental health issues is a human rights priority.[84] This type of information is usually provided at school, as that is where most children and youth can be found. However, the Manitoba Office of the Children's Advocate cautions that youth most at risk of suicide often struggle with school attendance. Therefore, they suggest that awareness campaigns need to incorporate ways to reach youth who are not in school.[85]

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION CALL TO ACTION

We call upon those who can effect change within the Canadian health-care system to recognize the value of Aboriginal healing practices and use them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and Elders where requested by Aboriginal patients.

Youth told us they want forums to connect with each other to share their experiences and opinions on a range of issues that matter to them. The importance of peer support identified by the youth in the North matches what youth across Canada are saying. The Kids Help Phone *Teens Talk 2016* survey found that 54% of youth would talk to a personal friend about their suicidal thoughts, and 38% would talk to a boyfriend or girlfriend.[86]

This intense reliance on peers reinforces the youth's call for peer support or wellness groups as an alternative (or addition) to individual mental health counselling. Such a forum was undertaken in a Saskatoon high school when two groups of male students met once a week for an hour "[...] to learn more about themselves, their peers, and the social pressures that weigh on them all."[87] The impact of creating space for youth to talk openly about sensitive issues resulted in many benefits as described by the participants at the end of the school year, including, "[...] Some of the topics we discussed were very personal, and came from a very vulnerable place. You were able to see people in a different light."[88]

More opportunities such as peer groups that focus on wellness, combined with more education on healthy coping skills, were options that youth indicated would build resilience and reduce suicidal behavior among their peers.

BREAKING POINT – HOUSE OF COMMONS RECOMMENDATION

That the Government of Canada ensure that mental health services in Indigenous communities are trauma-informed and provide safe spaces for young people to disclose adverse childhood events and provide culturally appropriate follow-up care.

Get some support for them in the community. A lot of people are affected by suicide. Need resources in communities. Communities can fix things. Young people are motivated.

- Elder





I HAVE A RIGHT TO ENJOY MY CULTURE.

6.7 CONCLUSION OF THEMATIC FINDINGS

"I think we are the solution"

The youth in northern Saskatchewan are a unique population with distinctive strengths and challenges. Throughout this report, these young people have identified a number of calls to action. They are calling for a stop to bullying and substance misuse, and increased positive support, physical safety, and meaningful activities for youth. Improving the mental health system to make it more accessible and applicable to youth was also identified as requiring action. To prevent youth suicide, a holistic approach addressing all of these areas is necessary.

When looking at the totality of what youth told us, it became evident that these themes are interconnected. "Suicide is never the result of a single factor or event. The factors that lead an individual to suicide are usually multiple and complex [...]."[89] Although the voices of the youth came through loud and clear, our discussions were not exhaustive. While this project has reminded us of the importance of learning from the experiences of our young people, it has also demonstrated that there is still more to be learned from them in each of the areas they identified.

Not only do we want to use our office as a platform for youth voice, we want to support communities and public services working with children and youth to engage with young people themselves and acknowledge the value of their contributions. We are all in this together.

We mentioned earlier that some communities have recently engaged their youth by asking their opinion on the issue of suicide, but youth told us they wanted more of these opportunities. A number of youth asked to ***have more discussions like this*** and to ***have a chance to express their opinions freely.***

When we asked youth if they wanted to be part of a solution to youth suicide, some youth told us,

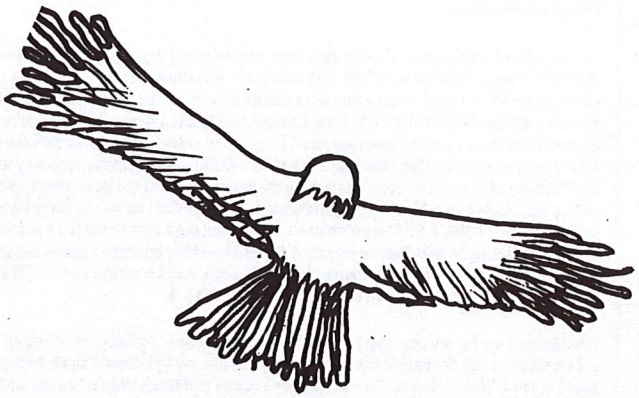
> **[...] you're not going to change youth without talking to the youth about it.**

I think we are the solution. Without us, there would be no change even possible. With our generation alone you can see how much is changing because we did something about it, instead of talking about it. We put [...] words into actions and we got progress out of it. And I think by continuing that stride it's only going to get better. It won't get better with a snap of your fingers. But in time and in years, it will change. You just got to be patient and hardworking and dedicated to make that change happen.

What is so good about the youth who spoke to you is that they are able to verbalize what happened. Past generation never verbalized what they experienced. They kept it inside, swallowed it and lived with it. It causes addictions and barriers. There is going to be a big improvement in communities.

- Elder





"LIFE IS PRECIOUS — EVERYONE IS HERE FOR A PURPOSE. GOTTA LOVE ONE ANOTHER"



7.0 MESSAGES OF HOPE

Throughout this project youth told us it would be helpful to hear from other young people who have gone through similar experiences. As one youth told us earlier, ***tell them what you've been through and tell them that there's actually hope in, like, feeling that way.*** Below are the stories of two individuals – one who overcame depression and another who had attempted suicide as a young person. Their stories show that it is possible to break through and create a new future after facing significant challenges to their mental wellness.

AARON*

Aaron's story illustrates how a young person struggling with mental health issues due to experiencing trauma found ways to turn things around. He told us,

I don't mind talking about my personal stuff [...]. If the other people want to hear kind of what like I've been through, it's just like, I want to show them that if they can accept my advice...if they want to, like, if they need any help I wouldn't mind helping them because there's a lot of young people that are [dying by] suicide, and that' why they...sometimes they probably might think they don't have enough attention and people don't care about them, but inside they really care about them [...].

For me, when I was younger like the first time I experienced depression, I didn't know what depression was. I was thirteen. The first time that I actually felt depression, I was trying to eat, but I couldn't. I tried to eat again but I couldn't. I tried to go to school. Something was stopping me like holding me back. Like, I always had this big feeling [...] like you're trapped. A big weight on your shoulder and your heart [...]. You're stuck. You don't know where to go after that. Then you start staying inside and you start building more depression onto you. That's what happened to me. Everyone was asking me where I was. At the point where everyone was asking me where I was, I just told my grandma [...]. didn't want no one to know where I was, because at that point, I didn't want no one caring about me because I lost a good friend, a good close brother – like, I was connected. When I lost him, because I witnessed him in front of my eyes and that's where I'm traumatized and...yeah, that's a...that's how...I still deal with depression on my own, but I can control it, my anxieties [...].

What helped me for my depression? That's a tricky question, actually. What helped me was [...] I wanted to see the people that I wanted to see, like my old friends again because they joked around. They're funny. They keep you company and that's what takes the weight off your shoulder. Seeing other people, friends, meeting new people [...].

What I like about a youth is my culture, how it helps me. I pick my own medicines and that I smudge. Enjoy...I pray to have a good day and see zen people every day. Not like every day, but like every once in a while. And pray for other people that hopefully they heal in time. And like, I like playing basketball [...]. And this guy right here [gesturing to a friend at the table]. And I like to go [...] fishing.

[...] My music is, like, my meditation, but it helps with your mind not to overthink. That's what I use [...].

I have my own space. Sometimes I like being around people, but I...you just have to get your own space once in a while. Like sometimes I talk to other, like, friends of mine. Ask them if they're okay or not. [...] Then, they'll ask me randomly if they need advice. I give them advice, I guess. Cause for me, I don't drink or smoke or anything. And, yeah. I don't really like alcohol 'cause it took away two of my family, my relatives, that are close to me. So, I'm against it and I'll always be against it. I used to smoke but I quit because the reason I smoked was that I was in pain inside and I didn't know how to control my anxiety attacks. So I stayed home, dropped out of grade 7. Didn't do my grade 8 or 9. And that almost killed me two times, but I managed to fight it and came back to school and finished my, finished my grade 10 and going to be graduating next year.

*Name has been changed.

SHANE

Shane attempted suicide twice by the time he was 12 years old. Now an adult, he describes not having grown up in a nurturing environment, experiencing both physical and emotional abuse. When speaking about his suicide attempts, Shane said,

I wasn't trying to die or anything, I was just trying to make everything stop. I wanted to quit feeling sad. I wanted to feel like I belonged, or have a place, or no place at all. I felt like I was in limbo sort of [...]. I felt like I was the problem and that I was the answer to fixing that problem.

Shane survived. And he told us how happy he was that he did, stating,

As far as suicide is concerned, I would've missed out on so much I'm looking forward to now [...]. I redefined myself, I redefined my path. Now, so many opportunities have came my way and it was because of work put in and I just started identifying that, that value that I had, and I'm learning to deal with it and learning what it is and who I am and I don't want that to stop because I'm having fun. It's really fun.

Shane has a message of hope for youth who might be vulnerable. He wrote:

YOU ARE WORTH IT!! YOU MATTER!!
I NEED YOU. WE NEED YOU.
THE WORLD NEEDS YOU AND YOUR VOICE!!

I say that in caps because even though it is so true. It is sometimes hard to hear. or read.

Thoughts and feelings of helplessness. anxiety. depression and despair. is hard! It can make waking up and getting through the day. feel like your wading through mud. taking so much effort to go a couple feet.

USE THAT!!! OWN IT!!!

Use those feelings. and put them to work for yourself. Your community needs to know what you're going through. that's the only way it can be prevented. or managed. Use your voice. your thoughts and feelings to help others. Live hour by hour if that's what it takes. SAVE LIVES!! And YOU WILL.

There are people who spend their lifetime studying. trying to understand your feelings. what you may be experiencing. or not. They spend tens of thousands of dollars in education. to get a glimpse of understanding. in the gift YOU carry.

Feelings.....

Anger. Fear. Sadness. Shame. Loneliness. Frustration. Guilt.

Happy. Gratitude. Love. Pleasure. Pride. Hope. Belonging.

It's what makes you human. Take all the feelings that make up YOU. and hug them. embrace them and know. appreciate. that is what makes you human. Hold those feelings tight. so that you can use them to help. lift up. and save others.

Speak up. Speak out. allow others to care. They do.....

In our conversations with Shane, it became clear that he is a genuine advocate for children and youth. In his words,

Especially when it comes to children, there's no such thing as good enough.

8.0 THOUGHTS FROM FAMILIES IMPACTED BY YOUTH SUICIDE

As part of this report, the Advocate wanted to meet with some families from different northern communities who have lost children to suicide so that they could provide their thoughts and insights into what their children may have been experiencing, and could give their perspectives on whether more was needed to help them. Much of what they had to say mirrors themes identified by the youth and reflects the youth's calls to action.

Although it may not be possible to know why these children died by suicide, these families told us that their children had either experienced significant bullying, recently suffered the loss of a close family member or showed signs of depression, stating,

> **[T]he bullying was bad. [...] She wasn't a slim girl, so she was teased about her weight and the way she looked. Some youth said she was "too fat to be their friend".**

> **My dad passed away... [and they were really close. She couldn't really grasp life after that. It was really hard. [...] She said she missed her grandpa [...].**

I know she was getting depressed but she wouldn't talk about it.

Each youth had previous incidences of self-harm or suicidal behaviour and had been connected, at some point, to mental health services. The families that their children either did not talk to them about their struggles or thoughts of suicide, or pushed them away if they tried to help. ***One parent wanted to encourage youth to talk more to people even, like, just their family. You can't keep everything inside all the time.*** Another parent also acknowledged that, ***we – as parents – need to be kicked in the ass to pay attention sometimes too.***



The families we spoke to who live in a remote community called for more mental health supports to be available and indicated this needed to be provided on a consistent, long-term basis. One parent told us that her daughter had difficulty connecting with available counsellors and stopped attending appointments. We heard that only one mental health worker is typically available in their community and were told that ***one is not enough.*** We also heard that it can be difficult for people to feel comfortable opening up to someone from their own community.

When the federal government sent additional mental health therapists to northern First Nations communities following the cluster of suicides in October 2016, families expressed frustration to the media that, ***Governments wait for stuff to happen before they send extra help.***[90] Furthermore, the families told us that having support people who are a stable presence in the community is important, rather than mental health therapists rotating in and out, ***because it is always hard to re-tell your story – especially when you are going through puberty and trying to understand life and your emotions.*** The families told us the extra supports have now been pulled out of their community. One parent stated, ***[y]ou can't just have a quick fix and leave everyone hanging and lost. That's how I felt when they told me they wouldn't have anybody coming anymore. My heart broke. Even as an adult that's really hard on me.***

The families in both remote and larger communities also expressed a need for youth to be able to talk to someone for as long as they needed. One parent told us her daughter had 20 to 30-minute appointments and that this was not sufficient. Another family explained that their child found the counselling available through her school and health clinic helpful, but said they see youth in their community who need a safe place to go at night if they do not want to be at home, and where they could talk to someone at a time that was convenient for them. They also told us it is important for youth to connect to their Indigenous culture, spirituality and past, but that there are not enough opportunities to do this in the community.

One parent whose daughter had received psychiatric treatment in the South following suicidal behaviour told us that when a youth comes back to a community with a safety plan, the individuals named as supports to the plan must be made aware of this and trained on how to respond if the youth comes to them for help.

The families also called for the need for more awareness around the issue of suicide. One parent reflected, ***It helps me to talk about it and if I can save at least one life by talking about it[...].*** Recently, some of these families have empowered themselves by holding candlelight vigils and marches to spread this awareness and send a message to their communities and to their young people. These families want young people to know they are cared for, that there are people there to support them and that they must speak up if they need help.[91]

What resonates from speaking with the families, aside from their profound grief from losing their child, is their willingness to share their experiences to help other youth in their community. For them, this is the most important way they can honour their children's lives so that some good can come from their loss.

BREAKING POINT- HOUSE OF COMMONS RECOMMENDATION

Subject to privacy laws and the wishes of the patient, that the Government of Canada, the respective provincial and territorial governments, work to improve discharge planning between jurisdictions so family or friends on reserve or in Inuit communities are notified of discharge plans from psychiatric facilities, residential treatment centres or hospitals.

9.0 MESSAGE FROM THE ELDERS

MESSAGE FROM A CREE ELDER

Teachings

My Grandfather said in one of his teachings to me, "See Good In People".

At one time in our life we were [the] youth of that time, we needed understanding, a sense of belonging and self-worth.

We received it by the love and caring of our immediate family. In that time, we still lived off the land and had families and community to help raise us.

Another teaching was life of self or life of another was more valuable than material things.

Through time, we have lost a lot of teachings and values.

The extended families do not exist, and our relationships have fractured.

This leaves the youth of today without the required guidance and a sense of who they are.

It is very important for elders to play a vital part in the youth's life, through teachings, guidance, educating about Métis and First Nation People. When they can answer; "Who am I?" than they are on their way to a healthy journey. I am very much honored to be part of the Child Advocates Research Report.

By understanding and listening to the youth's voices we can help support the youth to look at living as an alternative to suicide.



MESSAGE FROM A DENE ELDER

Listen to Me

When I first heard that Children's Advocate was very serious about listening to our youth on the subject of suicide, I was really happy to be part of it because I asked myself how could I make a difference in these young people's lives.

When a young person commits suicide there is blame, guilt and searching for the "why's" and "what if's". Nothing makes sense of the chaos. When a young person is suddenly snatched away by suicide, parents are grieving, and they should know that they are being cared for in the spirit world with every bit of love and caring as their parents gave them. In dreams you feel the child and you never lose a child or loved one, no one is ever lost to anyone they love.

There is such a life force in a young person that with holistic healing, change of diet, or whatever is best for their own particular healing, they can often get well mentally and physically. Sometimes I wonder how to deal with children who are thinking about killing themselves, maybe these children can help provide a perspective from the child's point of view.

Don't spoil me, I know quite well I shouldn't have all I ask for, I am only testing you.

Don't be afraid to be firm with me, I prefer it, it makes me feel secure.

Don't nag me if you do I will have to protect myself by appearing deaf.

Don't ever think it is beneath your dignity to apologize to me, an honest apology makes me surprisingly warm toward you.

Don't forget I have to experiment; I can't get on without it. So please put up with it.

Don't tell me my fears are silly, they are terribly REAL.



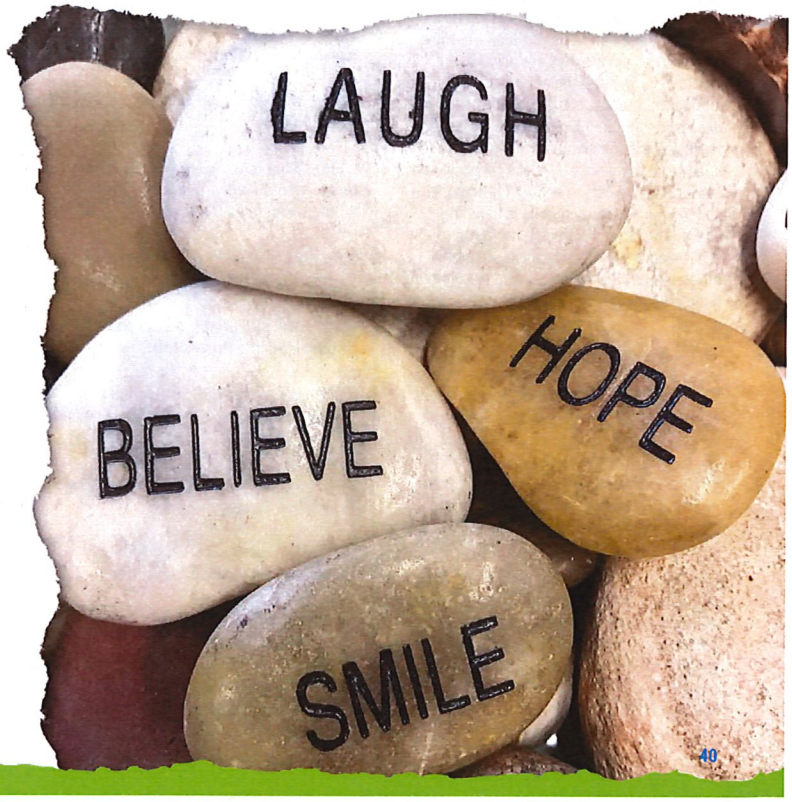
MESSAGE FROM A MÉTIS ELDER

Our Way

When I was a young girl growing up in Cumberland House, I knew who I was and where I fit in the community. I knew my role would shift and change as the days went on, but always was cognizant of my responsibilities. Everyone in Cumberland House held multiple titles; of partner, caregiver, provider, counsellor, neighbourhood watch... our roles changed as often as the weather. It was necessary, though, to keep the community functioning and its members safe. Even as children we were expected to contribute to the community, to be productive members in whatever capacity we could. We looked after one another and there was never a time someone was ever left on their own. When my mother would go away, aunties were there stepping into her role. When we would go out playing, the adults would keep an eye on us all. We had in place a system of societal laws, teachings, and ceremonies that kept the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional parts of every person – from our children to our Elders – in balance. This was our way.

When our culture was threatened and our people lost, the foundations of our community shifted. For our youth, their purpose was no longer community wellness but survival. Today's generation of youth has significantly more to deal with than the intergenerational devastation of Residential Schools, the '60s Scoop, and the racism that pulled our families apart; street gangs, drugs and alcohol, the internet and the subsequent culture of abuse it fosters – these are modern symptoms of the loss of community and of purpose the older generations first experienced. Our youth have been left on their own to find a way to survive the legacy of colonization, and without the balance of person and community, the epidemic of suicide has found its footing. It has been internalized as the final option out of a life that feels hopeless and futile. Our youth are telling us they are hurting, they are in pain, and they do not see another way out. It is our responsibility as Kokums, Mushums, as aunts and uncles and cousins and neighbours, to show them another way; one that fosters hope and resilience, strength and balance, and restores a sense of purpose and direction.
This is our way.





10.0 THE ADVOCATE'S CALL TO ACTION

> *"It's not a phase or for attention. It's how we feel. It's hard on a depressed/ suicidal person to get up and face the day. Telling us to just walk it off is like breaking our legs and saying that. Everything we do is a struggle"*

THE YOUTH HAVE SPOKEN

As the Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth, it is incumbent on our office to be a voice for all children and youth in this province, whose voices are often marginalized, silenced, or not heard-or have who have adults talking for them. This is especially true for our Indigenous children and youth who have been historically oppressed and even further marginalized due to the unique circumstances they face.

The fundamental goal guiding our work is to be part of solutions that result in positive change in the quality of life for First Nations and Métis children and youth in Saskatchewan. This report stands as a testimony of Indigenous youth on the topic of suicide to ensure they are being heard and to acknowledge their perspectives in a manner that respects their experiences and the realities of their lives. It is to empower young people to call out for the changes they need to be mentally, spiritually, physical and emotionally healthy. It is about letting these children know that someone is listening and will be strongly advocating for their well-being. We know that there are many other people who are also trying to help our Indigenous youth and we are grateful for this as well.

We did not necessarily expect this report to break new ground on the risk and protective factors related to suicide, as significant work has been done in this area. Rather, it was meant to bring the voices of Indigenous youth from northern Saskatchewan to the fore – these young people have a right to be heard. These youth have spoken clearly about wanting a life where they can feel safe, secure, and protected.

Our office is raising alarm bells regarding the high rate of suicide amongst the Indigenous children and youth in this province, and with respect to the devastating statistic that our Indigenous girls are 26 times more likely than non-Indigenous girls to die by suicide. Although this project did not explore differences between genders, there is a need for further research in this regard to dig deep about why this is happening.

The voices of the youth presented here, combined with these appalling statistics, reflect the extreme urgency with which these young people require substantial help. Their voices also reinforce the answers reflected within the depth of work previously done on this issue across Canada. While not an exhaustive list, the research, reports, commissions, plans and strategies listed below lay out numerous recommendations and calls to action, many of which have been referenced throughout this report.

2004 – Suicide Among Aboriginal People in Canada – Aboriginal Healing Foundation

2005 – Wen:de We are Coming to the Light of Day Report

2006 – What is Working, What is Hopeful... Supporting Suicide Prevention Strategies Within Indigenous Communities

2007 – Aboriginal Youth: A Manual of Promising Suicide Prevention Strategies

2009 – The Blueprint for a Canadian National Suicide Prevention Strategy

2012 – World Health Organization Public Health Action for the Prevention of Suicide: A Framework

2012 – National Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy

2012 – An Act Respecting a Federal Framework for Suicide Prevention

2012 – Trauma, Turmoil and Tragedy: Understanding the Needs of Children and Youth at Risk of Suicide and Self-Harm (British Columbia Representative for Children and Youth)

Give them hope for the future. Have to bang those doors open

- Elder



2013 – Mental Health Strategy for Canada: Changing Directions, Changing Lives

2014 – World Health Organization's Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative

2015 – Without Denial, Delay or Disruption: Ensuring First Nations Children Access to Equitable Services through Jordan's Principle - 2015

2015 – First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework

2015 – Honouring the Truth, Reconciling Their Voices – Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report

2016 - Métis Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy (Métis Nation-Saskatchewan)

2016 – Toward a Better Tomorrow: Addressing the Challenge of Youth Suicide (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate Alberta)

2016 – The Changing Face of Youth Suicide in Manitoba and the Narrow Window for Intervention: Phase Two (Office of the Children's Advocate Manitoba)

2016 – Working Together to Prevent Suicide in Canada: Federal Framework for Suicide Prevention

2017 - Suicide Prevention for Indigenous Youth in Rural and Remote Northern Saskatchewan Communities

2017 – Breaking Point: The Suicide Crisis in Indigenous Communities

2017 – Breaking Point: The Suicide Crisis in Indigenous Communities - Government Response

2017 – Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations – Discussion Paper regarding a Saskatchewan First Nations Suicide Prevention Strategy

What else can the Advocate for Children and Youth recommend when the path is clear on what needs to be done? The calls to action by youth in northern Saskatchewan presented here – in conjunction with the conclusions and recommendations of the above reports –illustrate the way forward. Indigenous youth are desperate for ACTION that will empower their communities, as well as empower young people to change their futures. Our governments need to LISTEN to these children who are crying and pleading for our help, and dying while waiting for it.

10.1 MOVING FORWARD AND TAKING IMMEDIATE ACTION

Moving forward and taking immediate action means that the federal, provincial, municipal and regional governments must work together and in partnership with our Indigenous leaders and communities to consider the totality of the calls to action included both here and in the above reports. Moving forward means listening to youth, mobilizing support, building capacity within communities, and putting a priority on the best interests of children and youth by funding services and initiatives that will lead to better outcomes for their future. It also means fully supporting our Indigenous communities toward sovereignty/self-determination, as Indigenous peoples are in the best position to make decisions related to developments that affect their communities.

CAPACITY-BUILDING WITHIN COMMUNITY

The Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN) recently released a *Discussion Paper regarding a Saskatchewan First Nations Suicide Prevention Strategy* (2017). That paper clearly, and rightly, points out that "First Nations communities in Saskatchewan are burdened with many mental health disparities, and suicide is an urgent health care need for First Nations people within the province."[92] The paper also speaks to the need for more supports generally, as well as supports that are culturally relevant and sustainable.

Indigenous communities have incredible strength. However, we know that that many communities are in pain. The Elders who provided their guidance, wisdom and knowledge to our office throughout this project spoke of the urgent need to support families, children and communities as part of holistic wellness. They told us this requires increased funding to support families in getting them the assistance that is desperately needed and for more medical services that have culture embedded within the framework of service. This is what must be in place for communities to address historical trauma, to talk about physical and sexual abuse, to get families and leaders talking about what is happening, and to reach out and work together. The Elders explained that breaking the silence is crucial to interrupting the inter-generational abuse that resulted from colonization and to increasing the capacity of communities to move forward.

Moving forward and taking immediate action should reflect tangible ways to build capacity within communities. Many of the reports referenced above reinforce the importance of capacity-building to address mental health and wellness and outline calls to action in this regard. Using a capacity-building model helps communities to develop from the inside out and makes room for youth to be part of that process.

The First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework (2015) report indicates that a continuum of wellness can be difficult to implement in remote regions due to isolation and limited resources. Nevertheless, the Continuum Framework states that "First Nations control of services, community wellness plans, partnership, investing in community development and capacity building"[93] is the way forward. It also suggests the need for greater collaboration between First Nations health organizations and the provincial and regional governments to move action forward in a measured and responsive manner.

In direct response to the House of Commons report on Indigenous suicide, the federal government has stated that it is "of the view that community capacity and control is a key component of a healthy community and that the implementation of programs and services (mental wellness and others) must be driven by the priorities, needs, culture and strengths of communities. All new investments will be implemented through engagement processes where Indigenous [First Nations, Métis and Inuit] partners provide government the direction."[94] This is important for both First Nations and Métis governments in Saskatchewan to consider in any suicide prevention strategy, whether existing or in development, to ensure it meets regional, community and cultural needs.

Learning from the various reports above and the position taken by the federal government, it is made clear that any efforts to address suicide in our province must also incorporate capacity-building from within communities.

SUPPORTING A SUICIDE PREVENTION STRATEGY FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN IN SASKATCHEWAN

There is no doubt that there is some good will on behalf of the federal government to address the issue of suicide as laid out in their response to the House of Commons report, *Breaking Point: The Suicide Crisis in Indigenous Communities*. This is evidenced by their commitment to provide an additional $1.2 million in funding over two years for increased mental health supports to First Nations in northern Saskatchewan[95]. In addition, the provincial government has developed the *Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan* (2014), the recommendations of which, if fully implemented, would go a long way in addressing the factors identified by the youth as contributing to suicide.

Through the various reports presented above, the scope and magnitude of the issue is laid out – as are the recommendations for required action. The voices of the youth presented here reinforce all of this. The province of Saskatchewan requires an Indigenous suicide strategy that encompasses these calls to action.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. The task now is to coordinate the available information, make it consumable for communities and provide them with the necessary resources and support to take the action required.

Following a similar cluster of youth suicides in Woodstock, Ontario in 2016, Ian Manion, a prominent Canadian psychologist specializing in youth suicide, told the media that a national suicide prevention strategy and an action plan for communities was the solution, stating, "You have community after community that are facing such really tragic circumstances and the communities are saying, 'what should we be doing?' [...] Rather than a community kind of trying to figure that all that out in the middle of a crisis, can you imagine if it was proactive and all the material was available to every community, so they could actually do it in advance and not be reactive?"[96] Our office could not agree more. Regrettably, the tragic events of October 2016 struck northern Saskatchewan only four months after this statement. How many more children must be lost and how many more communities must bear the brunt of these tragedies before a coordinated and collaborative strategy is developed?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a strategy is the key to reducing and preventing suicide and the adoption of a strategy "signals the commitment of government to tackling the issue."[97] The WHO offers some guidance on the elements required of such a strategy, including – among other things – identification of critical gaps in legislation, service provision and data collection; allocation of specific responsibilities among key stakeholders; quantification of the human and financial resources required for intervention; and a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to ensure accountability.

The federal government has already recognized the existing data showing the path forward, the need to work in collaboration with other stakeholders and the necessity of securing the required financial resources. In its response to the House of Commons report, it stated,



The most responsible thing we can do as a Government to support Indigenous wellness, is to follow and support Indigenous partners. We already have the roadmaps of how social and health systems need to be changed, how services need to be re-oriented, how gaps can be filled and programs and services can be enhanced. These roadmaps are the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework and the National Inuit Suicide Prevention Strategy. **Our job as government is to work with partners to bring together available resources and that those align with strategies developed with Indigenous partners, to remove barriers to their implementation, and to work in partnership with Indigenous organizations and communities to ensure that they are fully realized, as determined by communities[98].** [emphasis added]

However, our office is deeply concerned that sustainable financial commitments to address the significant areas identified by our youth are not evident. It will be critical for the Government of Canada, and the mandate of the recently appointed Federal Minister of Indigenous Services, The Honourable Jane Philpott, to close the socio-economic gap as part of this action.

We need to hold the federal government to its promises. Additionally, as the House of Commons so rightly stated, the government's response must be monitored to confirm appropriate resources are allocated and steps must be taken to ensure the Métis people are not left out of strategic prevention efforts.

In Saskatchewan, the FSIN is taking steps to fill the gap in local prevention efforts by developing a strategy specific to the First Nations youth in the province. Our office fully supports the FSIN's efforts to move this forward and is hopeful it will reflect the youth's calls to action outlined in this report. We are also aware that the Métis Nation has already developed a youth suicide strategy with communities being at various phases of implementation. We are hopeful that the anticipated FSIN strategy and the Métis Nation Suicide Prevention Strategy will be supported by both the federal and provincial governments to whatever extent the FSIN or Métis Nation requires to ensure it will be robust, reflective of youth voice, and action-driven.

Moving forward and taking immediate action means that our province supports and/or works with the FSIN to take immediate steps to develop and implement a strategy of action in the province of Saskatchewan that is supported by both the provincial and federal governments.

Moving forward and taking immediate action also means that the creation of any strategy includes the voices of Indigenous youth. The young people in northern Saskatchewan were clear in telling us they do, in fact, want to be part of the solution. This is consistent with their fundamental rights under both the UNCRC and the UNDRIP to be part of any decision-making related to matters that affect them.

THE ADVOCATE MAKES THE FOLLOWING CALLS TO ACTION:

CALL TO ACTION:

The Government of Saskatchewan work in partnership with the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations to support a Saskatchewan First Nations Suicide Prevention Strategy. The development of this strategy should:

- include the perspectives of Indigenous youth;
- be supported and implemented in a way that increases the capacity of communities;
- involve partnerships, where needed, with provincial ministries such as Health, Education, and Social Services; and
- be financially supported by the provincial government, as required, as the lives of our children and youth are everyone's responsibility.

CALL TO ACTION:

The Government of Saskatchewan work in partnership with the Métis Nation to further support the implementation of the existing Métis Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, ensuring that it:

- supports the implementation of the strategy in a way that increases the capacity of communities;
- involves partnerships, where needed, with provincial ministries such as Health, Education, and Social Services; and
- is financially supported by the provincial government, as required, as the lives of children and youth are everyone's responsibility.

CALL TO ACTION:

The Government of Canada work with, and fully support, the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations and the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan to support their suicide prevention strategies, including providing financial support as required.



JORDAN'S PRINCIPLE

Jordan's Principle was created and adopted in the House of Commons in 2007 to ensure First Nations children do not experience delays in, disruptions to, or denials of health services to which they have a right, and to ensure they access these services the same as all other children. Jordan's Principle was created to honour Jordan River Anderson who was born with complex medical needs in Norway House, Manitoba, and who died in hospital while the provincial and federal governments argued over who would pay for his at-home care. Jordan's Principle was intended to ensure that no First Nations child would be caught in the middle of jurisdictional disputes while waiting for the services to which they are entitled. [99]

Since the implementation of Jordan's Principle in law, there have been some concerns with the narrow interpretation applied by the federal government and a call to widen its parameters to include other important health services for First Nations children. As a result of these concerns and a number of rulings by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (CHRT), the government expanded and clarified their definition and application of Jordan's Principle in several ways, stating,

Jordan's Principle addresses the needs of First Nations children by ensuring there are no gaps in government services to them. It can address, for example, but is not limited to, gaps in such services as mental health, special education, dental, physical therapy, speech therapy, medical equipment and physiotherapy[100]. [emphasis added]

Since May 2017, there have been great strides in providing investment and support to First Nations children to access the above services. However, there continue to be some issues with implementation.

The recent mandate letter dated October 4, 2017, from Prime Minister Trudeau to Minister Philpott reflected the government's commitment for an improved response to Jordan's Principle stating that Minister Philpott is responsible to,

Develop and implement an improved response to the provision of child welfare and health care under Jordan's Principle that focuses on the best interests of the child. This will require a holistic approach to the delivery of services that focuses on prevention, family preservation and well-being, and community wellness. It

should include responding to immediate pressures to deliver health, child, and family services while working with the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs on self-governance frameworks.[101]

Our office is encouraged by the federal government's commitment to this newly expanded, holistic approach to increasing services and wellness to the Indigenous children in this country, and, in effect, Saskatchewan. As stated earlier, we are also encouraged by the recent investment into mental health services in northern Saskatchewan, specifically.

However, the government has significantly lagged in fully and immediately implementing the CHRT decisions. This appears to be contrary to their commitment to a well-defined path toward the solution, and children continue to suffer while waiting for the funding that will help make their lives better. This is inexcusable.

As part of this new direction by the federal government, we also believe it is incumbent on the provincial government to be part of the changes that are happening federally. This can be done by formally adopting Jordan's Principle and removing barriers to access, therefore, demonstrating their commitment to the Indigenous children in this province. This action would be consistent with the provincial government's adoption of the Saskatchewan Children and Youth First Principles in 2009, which state that all children in Saskatchewan have the rights to an equal standard of service, the highest possible standard of health and to be placed at the centre of all child-serving systems.

THE ADVOCATE MAKES THE FOLLOWING CALLS TO ACTION:

CALL TO ACTION:

The Government of Canada put an end to the inequities faced by Indigenous children and youth in Saskatchewan by fully implementing Jordan's Principle.

CALL TO ACTION:

The Government of Saskatchewan formally adopt Jordan's Principle and work in partnership with Indigenous governments, leaders, and communities to leverage the resources available under Jordan's Principle.

These calls to action are urgent – too many of our children in the North are living with enduring emotional pain, grief, and sadness. ***Moving forward and taking immediate action*** means that the both the federal and provincial governments must LISTEN to our youth's call to action for mental health supports and resources in northern Saskatchewan that are culturally appropriate, fully funded, consistent and sustainable. The federal government's response to the House of Commons report stated,

We recognize that suicide is a symptom of profound individual, family, and community distress and understand that the policies and practices of the past are among the significant factors contributing to the distress and its intergenerational impacts. There are no quick fixes to these long-standing issues, however, Canada is advancing efforts with Indigenous partners and other stakeholders to bring about change and hope in Indigenous communities.[102]

The federal and provincial governments must be held to account in their commitment to bring about the change required to undo past damage done by government to Indigenous peoples. This will be paramount so that children are not left suffering or dying waiting for help. On this basis, the Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth must have a role at the federal table on all child welfare issues pertaining to the Indigenous children and youth of this province. The benefit of the Advocate holding a role at this table will be the opportunity to ensure the voices of Indigenous children and youth in Saskatchewan are heard at the highest level, to provide a deeper context to the issues faced by these young people, and to be part of the path forward. Our Indigenous children and youth deserve nothing less.

11.0 CONCLUSION

A group of Indigenous youth in 12 northern Saskatchewan communities generously provided a blueprint for what they need to live a good life. The purpose of this report is to validate their calls to action, which the Advocate can confidently take forward to numerous platforms to fight for the changes these young people want. This includes encouraging families and communities to be a source of unconditional love, ending all forms of violence, enhancing safety and support, and making sustainable investments in youth-driven recreation, education and mental health services.

Indigenous youth are rights holders under the UNCRC and these protections are shared with all other youth around the globe. That said, an added layer of protection for Indigenous youth is embedded in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), specifically Articles 21 and 22, which state that, "Indigenous peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions [and] [...] particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities [...]."

We acknowledge that the Government of Canada has demonstrated a strong commitment to work in partnership with Indigenous communities to implement UNDRIP by establishing Nation-to-Nation agreements handing control of the delivery of health services to First Nations. We anticipate that the perspectives of Indigenous youth in northern Saskatchewan presented in this report will assist the Province, Canada and Indigenous peoples to share a common understanding moving forward with respect to what youth living in Saskatchewan's North say they need for mental and emotional wellness.

While the commitment by the Canadian government and Indigenous communities gives us every reason to be optimistic, these governments cannot tackle the issue of youth suicide alone. The Saskatchewan government must renew its commitment to the principles of reconciliation and non-discrimination, to fully support the vision of northern communities. Collective grief is a part of many of these communities as they have experienced clusters of suicide of their young people in the past. This can be overcome. Northern communities are rich in a myriad of ways, including: the strength of their people, the wisdom of their Elders, and the intelligence of their youth. As one youth told us, ***"You won't know unless you try."***



12.0 YOUTH CALLS TO ACTION - SUMMARY

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: STOP BULLYING!

- Educate adults, parents, youth and communities on bullying
- Take action when bullying is witnessed or reported

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: INCREASE POSITIVE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IN THE COMMUNITY

- Create forums to increase meaningful peer, family and school support
- Pay attention and reach out to youth
- See us, hear us - before its too late
  - Listen!
  - Understand!
  - Take us seriously!
  - Ask Us what we need!

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: ADDRESS DRUGS AND ALCOHOL IN OUR COMMUNITIES

- Increased supports for adults and communities
- Supports for youth

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: KEEP US SAFE!

- More security in the community

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: PROVIDE MEANINGFUL AND DIVERSE ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH

- More Activities Needed

YOUTH CALL TO ACTION: HELP US!

- Need for coping skills
- Increased mental health resources in the community that meet youth needs
- More and/or Different options to enhance youth well-being
- Suicide Awareness Education
- Increased awareness of available supports

WHERE CAN YOU GO IF YOU NEED HELP?

IN YOUR COMMUNITY:

CALL OR VISIT YOUR LOCAL HEALTH CENTRE OR HOSPITAL.

HELPLINES:

KIDS HELP PHONE

- Phone: 1 800-668-6868 (FREE)
  - When: 24 hours a day/7 days a week
- Online Chat with a Counsellor
  - When: Wednesday to Sunday – 5:00pm to 1:00am
  - Website: kidshelpphone.ca/ (press the 'Chat' button)

FIRST NATIONS AND INUIT HOPE FOR WELLNESS HELP LINE

- Phone: 1 855-242-3310 (FREE)
  - When: 24 hours a day /7 days a week

811 – ACCESS HEALTHLINE

- Phone: 811 or 1-877-800-0002 (FREE)
  - When: 24 hours a day/7 days a week

MOBILE CRISIS

- Phone: 1 (306) 764-1011 (Prince Albert)
  - When: Monday to Friday – 4:00p.m. to 8:00am
  - Saturday to Sunday and Statutory Holidays – 24 hours

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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