

Urban Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Beyond Statistics
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Statistics indicate that over half of all people in Canada who identify as an Aboriginal person (which includes First Nation, Métis and Inuit) live in an urban centre and that this urban component of residence is growing over time. Statistics also indicate that most of the Aboriginal people who live in urban centres live below the normal range of socio-economic indicators of wellness. Also of significance is that there is no mandate for the governance of Aboriginal peoples in urban centres comparable, for example, to the governance of First Nations on reserve. So urban centres remain spaces inhabited by Aboriginal peoples as they remain there or travel back and forth from reserves. This mobility pattern has been labelled as ‘churn’. I originally proposed to go beyond the quantifiable aspects and deliberate on other aspects of the urban Aboriginal experience and ask whether ‘churn’ respects the lived experiences of Aboriginal peoples. I thought that looking at the urban experience through an Aboriginal, rather than a statistical lens, would allow reconsideration of the notion of ‘churn’ in the deliberations of urban Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Since I made this proposal the *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study* (UAPS) was published. As much as I want to move away from statistics as an analysis of urban Aboriginal peoples I found that statistics on Aboriginal marginalization and the UAPS avoid, for the most part, a discussion of urban Aboriginal politics generally, and of self-determination specifically. Self-determination, for the purpose of this paper, refers to the inclusion of Aboriginal peoples in cultural and political decision-making processes that affects their lives. This paper will address how “the statistics” avoid a discussion of self-determination and political mobilization for Aboriginal peoples in urban centres. First, it will describe churn as unique to the urban Aboriginal experience. Second, it will look at the Aboriginal urban experience as informed by the critical issues submitted to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP). Third it will look at selected aspects of the UAPS that pertain to Aboriginal identity, traditional practices and political participation, with a discussion of these findings. The conclusion will bring these three components together to assess Aboriginal politics in urban centres beyond the statistics.

Urban Aboriginal peoples has become the term to describe all Aboriginal peoples (First Nation, status and non-status, Métis and Inuit) who identify as such and live in urban centres. According to the Canada Census (2006) nearly 1.2 million people, or 3.8 percent of Canada’s population identify as Aboriginal over half of which live in an urban centre. And the Aboriginal population is growing faster than the non-Aboriginal population over time.

Churn

Almost half of all Aboriginal peoples in Canada live in urban centres. As a group, Aboriginal Peoples residing in Canadian urban centres fare lowest on indicators for longevity, and education, and have higher rates of suicide (Kirmayer et al 2007), addictions, poverty and incarceration (Cardinal 2005; 2006) than the general population. Aboriginal children represent the fastest growing segment of Canada's youth population. While the non-Aboriginal population of Canada grew by 3.4 percent between 1996 and 2001, the Aboriginal population grew by 22 percent (Jenson 2004). They lag behind the Canadian average on socio-economic indicators of wellness, such as infant mortality and disability rates. Aboriginal children are likely to be poor and they are four times as likely to be born to adolescent parents and to have experienced hunger (Canada 2003, 5). In 2000, the low-income rate was 42 percent for Aboriginal people in urban centres compared to 17 percent for the general population (Siggner and Costa, 2005). The population of Aboriginal peoples is projected to increase at a greater rate than the total Canadian population. Aboriginal people will make up 4.1 percent of the Canadian population in 2017, compared to 3.4 percent in 2001 (Cardinal, 2005). Aboriginal people are at more risk than other groups experiencing poverty because they are subject to racism and social exclusion due to their ethnicity (Quebec, 2008).

Distribution of Aboriginal peoples in urban centres in Canada does not adhere to one model or one framework. Different cities have various compositions of Aboriginal residents. For example, 70 percent of Aboriginal residents in Winnipeg and 81 percent in Thunder Bay are Ojibwa. In Halifax 79 percent of Aboriginal residents are Mi'kmaq and 63 percent in Edmonton are Cree. In contrast, Vancouver's Aboriginal residents are from approximately 35 nations (Todd 2001, 99). Other factors to consider are the various population subgroups within each urban centres. For example, someone moving from a remote reserve to a large urban centre will face greater cultural challenges than someone moving from a reserve that is in closer proximity to an urban centre (Senate, 2003).

The urban Aboriginal experience is as varied as the urban centres themselves, but they do share commonalities that are attributable to the marginalization of most Aboriginal residents. First, urban centres present challenges to traditional sources of Aboriginal culture which includes contact with the land, contact with elders, Aboriginal languages, and spiritual ceremonies (Peters 2002, 62). Second, the overall urban Aboriginal population is not highly concentrated in any one neighbourhood in any urban centre in Canada. (Peters 2005, 70). Third, geographic variation creates different population subgroups in different cities. For example, a First Nation from a remote reserve may face greater cultural challenges than someone who may move from a reserve adjacent to an urban centre. Finally, two out of every three Aboriginal migrants move to, from, and within urban centres. This high residential mobility pattern is referred to as 'churn' (Senate 2003, 11). The significance of 'churn' on the urban Aboriginal experience deserves further discussion.

'Churn' describes mobility patterns that are unique to Aboriginal peoples in urban centres. It may also contribute to factors of marginalization. In urban centres there are

differences within 'churn' in that Aboriginal peoples may be characterized as non-movers, residential movers and migrants. Implications of mobility include cultural isolation, family instability, lone-parent families, high victimization and crime rates and difficulties in providing programs and services for Aboriginal peoples. The mobility that reinforces cultural isolation and economic marginalization is attributable to Aboriginal peoples migrating because their needs are not met and that programs and services are not being delivered effectively (Senate 2003, 11). In some cases Aboriginal people regard themselves as 'boundary-spanners' who divide their time in cities and on reserves (Letkemann 2004, 242). Also, gender is associated with urban mobility because women tend to move as heads of mother-led households while men may move as unattached, economically motivated males (Cooke and Belanger 2006; Anderson 2000, 270). The problem with 'churn' is that it reflects movement between an urban centre and a reserve that may not reflect the manner in which an Aboriginal person regards space or movement. While Aboriginal agencies found that high mobility rates create gaps in access to education and continuity of services, Aboriginal individuals regarded mobility as a symptom of the lack of housing (CMHC 2004, 38-41). The Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples admitted that little evidence exists to explain churn and stated: "Much more work needs to be done in order to effectively uncover how best to serve this community" (Senate 2003, 11).

Historically, Aboriginal identity has been compromised because of the intergenerational effects of assimilationist policies, forced adoptions, residential schools, economic marginalization and social exclusion (Proulx 2003, 128; Warry 2007, 117). Lawrence (2004) adds that exclusion from treaties and the gender bias of disenfranchising women who married non-Aboriginals, excluded Aboriginal peoples from making claims. The passing of Bill C-31 failed to enfranchise women and in some cases limited status to current generations while disenfranchising future generations. Clatworthy (2003) adds that Bill C-31 had substantial impacts in the Aboriginal population to the extent that the increase to the national population of Registered Indians is estimated at 35 percent. A significant majority of this short-term growth has occurred as a result of reinstatements and registrations. Much of this growth has accrued to the off-reserve population and has served to increase the size of the off-reserve population by nearly 80 percent (Clatworthy 2003, 86).

Socio-economic disparities and the traumatic impacts of discrimination and disempowerment pose obstacles for Aboriginal peoples to represent themselves in advocating for cultural practices. For this reason self-determination (Ladner 2009) is operationalized to test the capacity for Aboriginal peoples to make choices that pertain to their lifestyles. Self-determination admittedly poses a spectrum of conceptual problems and possibilities. Approaches to self-determination may range from submissions made to RCAP to the preference of some Aboriginal scholars to address quality-of-life issues through the medicine wheel (described as divided into four parts that represent the interconnectedness of mind, body, emotions and spirit that must be met for the development of human potential)(Salée 2006, 8). Self-determination for the purpose of this paper is to locate spaces where Aboriginal peoples are self-determining. In other words, first, Aboriginal peoples are self-determining where and when they define and seek

solutions to their own problems. Second, rather than accommodating Aboriginal peoples within mainstream society this process would affirm Aboriginal decisions regarding their well-being. Self-determination in this sense involves the extent to which Aboriginal peoples in urban centres are involved in decision-making that accommodates their needs.

What are the implications for these peoples living in urban centres? To some extent the literature focuses on the socio-economic disparities and the factors that contribute to churn for Aboriginal peoples living in urban centres. The proposal for this paper envisioned going beyond statistics to capture the urban Aboriginal experience beyond numbers. Just recently *The Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study* was published. It provides comprehensive research regarding various aspects of urban life while downplaying indicators that contribute to the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples. Rather than focusing on the quantitative data that was presented in the UAPS I propose to look at the variables that were selected to assess the aspects of urban Aboriginal life studied. I will analyze the selected findings of the UAPS by aligning them with critical issues for Aboriginal peoples in urban centres as identified by RCAP. This will assist in tracing and locating indicators that align with self-determination for Aboriginal peoples in urban centres.

Critical Issues for Urban Aboriginal Peoples as Identified in RCAP

Of the five volume RCAP *Report*, Chapter Seven in Volume Four, “Urban Perspectives” reported on Aboriginal peoples in urban centres. Of the many submissions made to the RCAP critical issues for Aboriginal peoples in urban centres included the “challenges to their cultural identity, exclusion from opportunities for self-determination, discrimination, and the difficulty of finding culturally appropriate services” (1996, 520). This section will explore these issues as a way of informing us of crucial elements of the Aboriginal experience in urban centres by addressing: challenges to cultural identity and finding culturally appropriate services; discrimination; and models of self-determination.

Since a majority of people who identify as Aboriginal live in urban centres the extent to which they can maintain a positive cultural identity will “significantly affect the survival of Aboriginal peoples as distinct peoples” (1996, 522). Maintaining an identity is more difficult in urban centres because “many of the sources of traditional Aboriginal culture, including contact with the land, elders, Aboriginal languages and spiritual ceremonies, are not easily accessible” (1996, 522). Also Aboriginal cultural identity is not a single element. It is composed of various features that together shape how a person thinks about herself or himself as an Aboriginal person rooted in Aboriginal experiences. Etah, an Aboriginal youth describes cultural identity as: “There is something my uncle said, you know, “You’re not a true Indian unless you ... follow the culture, then you are an Indian.” It’s not a status thing. It’s not a piece of paper. It’s a spiritual thing, an emotional thing, a mental thing, a physical thing” (1996, 524).

Other essential aspects of cultural identity for Aboriginal people are elders, the effects of discrimination, inaccurate perceptions by mainstream society and healing. Elders, “are seen as forces in urban Aboriginal peoples’ lives that enabled them to endure or see beyond the pain and

the turmoil they experience in their families, communities and within themselves regarding their Aboriginal identity”(1996, 525). RCAP presenters and participants in learning circles felt that racism and discrimination directed against them as Aboriginal people had a negative impact on their cultural identification (1996, 527) to the extent that one of the most difficult aspects of urban life for Aboriginal peoples is dealing with racism (1996, 526).

Racism is experienced through discrimination, bias, exclusion, stereotypes, lack of support and recognition, negative attitudes, alienation in the workplace and lack of role models in management positions. Racism is exclusion...racism is manifested in many ways. It is unconscious, direct, individual, systemic and institutional. (Louise Chippeway Chairperson, Aboriginal Advisory Council) (1996, 527).

RCAP explained that most Canadians do not understand the practice of traditional Aboriginal cultures in cities because they have been taught to ‘understand’ narrow and inaccurate stereotypes of Aboriginal culture. Images of Aboriginal culture for many people may consist of totem poles, stone carvings, moccasins and feather head-dress so that culture is viewed as no more than a collection of objects and rituals, observed in isolation from their meaning within its appropriate cultural context (1996, 523) Submissions to the commission stated that Aboriginal children in urban centres have little opportunity to learn, or play with classmates in Aboriginal languages. Also school curricula rarely included the history of Aboriginal peoples (1996, 529). Submissions made to RCAP stressed the importance of a strong cultural foundation for the healing of the urban Aboriginal community.

Throughout our work in addressing family violence we strive to return our people to a time where everyone had a place in the circle and was valued. Recovering our identity will contribute to healing ourselves. Our healing will require us to rediscover who we are. We cannot look outside for our self-image, we need to rededicate ourselves to understanding our traditional ways. In our songs, ceremony, language and relationships lie the instructions and directions for recovery. (Harold Orton for Janet Yorke, Director Barrie Community Care Centre for Substance Abuse) (1996, 533).

RCAP’s findings on healing provide a comprehensive summary for cultural identity: “The key to the healing process lies in protecting and supporting all elements that urban Aboriginal people consider an integral part of their cultural identity: spirituality, language, a land base, elders, values and traditions, family and ceremonial life”(1996, 533).

RCAP observed that programs and services developed for the general population in urban centres do little to accommodate Aboriginal cultural identity because they are not designed to do so. As a result, Aboriginal cultural and spiritual preferences needs are not considered. Aboriginal people advocated for holistic services that work to heal the whole person, but this approach is not always compatible with services that are designed to address specific problems, such as unemployment or child neglect, that focus on symptoms rather than the underlying causes. Their cultural unsuitability is attributable to the lack of Aboriginal involvement in their design, development and delivery. RCAP found that Aboriginal people and organizations are under-utilized in all phases of programming (1996, 554). The commission not only recommended that

Aboriginal people need and should have culturally appropriate services, but in addition, they stated that Aboriginal people should be involved in the design of these services that promote a holistic approach to the healing of individuals and communities (1996, 554).

The commission reported that some mainstream agencies and municipal governments are relying more on Aboriginal agencies to provide services because they cannot address the needs of urban Aboriginal people. This poses problems for Aboriginal organizations that not only are underfunded, but operate on an ad hoc or short-term project-funding. These funding arrangements fail to accommodate the planning and delivery of services. In addition, challenges to staffing include programs that are understaffed, dependency on unpaid and untrained volunteers, staff and volunteer burn-out, and administrators who spend more time seeking funding instead of delivering services (1996, 555). RCAP recommended that “Changes are urgently required to improve access, to involve Aboriginal people in the design, development and delivery of services, and to establish or enhance cross-cultural training” (1996, 557).

According to the commission friendship centres have taken a lead in developing services based on Aboriginal values, beliefs and practices (1996, 565). Friendship centres are important for Aboriginal people in urban centres because they are a gathering place for individuals who have lost their culture and because it is difficult to practise traditional Aboriginal culture without resources such as elders, venues for ceremonies, and cultural education opportunities. “Friendship centers are ideally placed to expand their role in this regard through education, training, recreation and social programs. However, there is currently no specific funding for cultural education activities outside First Nations territories” (1996, 566).

Aboriginal women and the children they care for are especially vulnerable in urban centres. RCAP reported that the roles of women in formal and informal institutions are crucial to the day-to-day survival of urban Aboriginal people, but the needs of urban Aboriginal women are not adequately met and the reality of their lives often remains unvalidated (1996, 570). Many Aboriginal women, along with their children become urbanized due to family abuse, separations and deaths. The testimonials below attest to the discrimination confronted by Aboriginal women within their communities and in mainstream society.

Presently the women in our communities are suffering from dictatorship governments that have been imposed on us by the Indian Act. We are oppressed in our communities. Our women have no voice, nowhere to go for appeal processes. If we are being discriminated against within our community or when we are being abused in our communities, where do the women go?...The Royal Commission to date has not heard the true story of Aboriginal women’s oppression. The women are afraid to come out and speak in a public forum such as this. We are penalized if we say anything about the oppression that we have to undergo in our community. Joyce Courchene President, Nongom Ikkwe Indigenous Women’s Collective (1996, 574).

Our women face racism and systemic stereotyping at every turn. For Aboriginal women, this racism and stereotyping is rampant right through the system, from the police to the courts, child welfare agencies to income security. Although the law is supposed to treat

everyone equally, we all know this is not an Aboriginal reality. Darlene Hall Ikwe Widdjiitiwin (1996, 576).

Also of significance is that the Aboriginal youth population makes up almost half of the urban Aboriginal population. According to RCAP many youths face the same circumstances as older Aboriginal people which include cultural confusion, high unemployment, violence, racism and substance abuse. Also, youth experience higher rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease than other young Canadians (561).

Approaches to remedy the crucial issue of exclusion from opportunities for self-determination included several proposed governing arrangements that were submitted to RCAP. RCAP reported that a survey by the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples of more than 1300 Aboriginal people living in six major metropolitan centres found that “virtually all Aboriginal respondents (92 per cent) either strongly (66 per cent) or somewhat (26 per cent) support this effort to have Aboriginal people in urban areas run their own affairs”(584). Of significance is that these systems include Aboriginal peoples in decision-making processes that acknowledge their cultural identity. Of the proposals for self-determination submitted to RCAP co-management and community of interest arrangements are considered for this paper. The rationale for selecting these proposed arrangements is that they facilitate Aboriginal participation at a local level especially in those areas that are relevant to the acknowledgement, maintenance and preservation of Aboriginal cultural identity. Co-management facilitates Aboriginal institutions by allowing for common services by all urban residents, while recognizing the essential aspects of Aboriginal culture that are the foundations of self-government. In this governing system institutions and services are established by a provincial, territorial, federal and in some cases local government to serve the general population, with specific provisions for Aboriginal people. Co-management of the institution or service, and the nature of Aboriginal participation, would be established in most cases through enabling legislation or negotiated agreements. Because local government authority is delegated by provincial and territorial governments this limits their ability to negotiate these agreements. So co-management arrangements would be implemented by federal, provincial or territorial legislation, even though they pertain to local services. Exceptions to this would be in fields such as culture and recreation, where local agreements could participate in co-management. These approaches do not represent self-government as such for urban Aboriginal people. All involve Aboriginal people working within the legislative, policy and administrative frameworks of mainstream Canadian governments. While this reality may afford urban Aboriginal people only limited opportunity to influence governance in urban centres, there are still important benefits. These include having a voice in local government decision making and promoting greater understanding and relations between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people in urban centres (1996, 583).

Under the community of interest model the urban community could establish a city-wide body with political and administrative functions that would exercise self-government in various sectors and institutions bound by its urban boundaries. Existing urban Aboriginal organizations would be recruited for their experience to develop this new form of governance. This model

facilitates community of interest governments to enter into agreements with other Aboriginal governments and other urban governments, to co-operate in the efficient delivery of services to urban Aboriginal peoples (585). “A major strength of the urban community of interest approach is the opportunity it offers Aboriginal people in urban areas who have no other access to self-government” (1996, 585).

In regards to its report on “Urban Perspectives” RCAP concluded:

Aboriginal people want urban institutions that reflect Aboriginal values. As we have seen, this often means creating or strengthening Aboriginally controlled institutions. Urban Aboriginal people also want to be able to practise their culture and traditions in the urban setting. And like Aboriginal people everywhere, urban Aboriginal people are seeking self-determination...Territory, land and home have always been important to Aboriginal people...there is no need for Aboriginal people to shed their identity at the city limits. Identity is more than skin deep. It is in the blood, the heart and the mind, Aboriginal people told us; you carry it with you wherever you go (RCAP 1996, 612).

In summary, the critical issues as identified by RCAP for Aboriginal peoples in urban centers stress the importance of cultural identity. This is challenged by isolation from the home community, lack of family support, and lack of contact with elders. In addition, mainstream agencies and institutions with different value bases, the absence of culturally appropriate programs and discrimination all contribute to negatively impact on identity. Governance models for self-determination cover a broad spectrum, but the selected models of co-management and community of interest allow for Aboriginal participation, especially in the areas that are integral for the acknowledgement and accommodation of their cultural identity.

The Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study (UAPS)

In this section I highlight selected aspects of UAPS that align with the critical issues as identified by RCAP in its report on “Urban Perspectives”. Rather than aligning RCAP’s report with UAPS survey, this comparison allows an analysis of whether critical issues identified almost 15 years ago when RCAP was published are relevant for Aboriginal peoples living in urban centres today. After a brief introduction to UAPS, this section will introduce urban Aboriginal identity, the criminal justice system, health, political identity, experiences of discrimination and engagement and experiences with non-Aboriginal services and organizations as reported by UAPS.

The Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study (2010) is a research project recently published by Environics Institute that “has gone beyond the numbers” (uaps.ca). Rather than collecting economic and social facts the UAPS (2010) set out to inquire about the “values, experiences, identities and aspirations of urban Aboriginal peoples”(6). It also described the study as about the future, not the past. Of interest to this paper, the UAPS inquired: “Which factors are leading them toward greater success, autonomy and cultural confidence?”(6). Interviews were conducted with 2,614 First Nations peoples, Métis and Inuit living in Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Montreal, Halifax and Ottawa, as well as 2,501 non-Aboriginal Canadians.

According to UAPS one of the reasons for the increase in the number of people to identify as Aboriginal is that contemporary urban Aboriginal peoples are more positive about their Aboriginal identity than at any time in the past (42). There is a strong indigenous pride among urban Aboriginal peoples with eight out of ten indicating that they are proud to be First Nations, Métis or Inuk (48). Of significance to urban Aboriginal identity is the impact of residential schools in shaping their lives in the present day. Two-thirds of those surveyed indicated that they themselves or a family member were a student at a residential school or a provincial day school. Half of those interviewed indicated that the residential school experience has had some impact in shaping their lives today (55). So identity is highly positive for Aboriginal peoples living in urban centres. And a majority still feel the effects of the residential school system.

According to UAPS 62 per cent of urban Aboriginal peoples have had contact with the Canadian criminal system either as a witness to or a victim of a crime, or have been arrested or charged with a crime (97). The UAPS indicates that there is strong support for an Aboriginal justice system among urban Aboriginal peoples especially among those with little confidence in the justice system (100). When asked why they think an Aboriginal justice system separate from the mainstream system is a good idea participants indicated (in order of support): they believe Aboriginal people would be better served by a system that allows them to be judged within their own value system and by their own peers; respects Aboriginal history and culture; the current justice system is perceived to be biased and treats Aboriginal people unjustly; it would provide greater rehabilitation, healing and reduce recidivism; it would offer a setting that is more comfortable culturally for Aboriginal people; and provide a worthy alternative to an existing system perceived to be ineffective for Aboriginal people. The major reason the Aboriginal people felt that creating a separate system is a bad idea is because they feel Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people should be treated equally to avoid discrimination (101). In summary, Aboriginal peoples surveyed feel that alternative approaches to justice would reduce Aboriginal crime rates, improve their confidence in the justice and improve community safety (102). There is a strong response from Aboriginal people between incorporating Aboriginal concepts of justice and Aboriginal cultural values as shaping participation in the criminal justice system.

Responses for support of traditional healing practices demonstrated similar findings as for an Aboriginal justice system. The study reported that Aboriginal peoples' concept of health includes spirituality, relation to the land and strength of Aboriginal identity (115). Access to traditional healing practices is more important than access to mainstream health care for over half of the Aboriginal participants that were surveyed, while over one-quarter indicated that traditional practices are more important (116).

Regarding discrimination UAPS reported that a strong majority of urban Aboriginal peoples representing all socio-demographic groups agree that others behave in a negative way toward them and that they have been insulted because of their Aboriginal background. Nine out of ten participants either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that "I think others behave in an unfair/negative way towards Aboriginal people" (78). A large majority also

indicated that they experienced unfair treatment because they are Aboriginal (78). Of interest is that UAPS also reported that regardless of negative and unfair treatment urban Aboriginal peoples feel accepted by non-Aboriginal people.

Political Identity Engagement explored urban Aboriginal peoples' level of engagement in Aboriginal and Canadian politics and political organization, and the factors that contributed to involvement in these two organizations (86). Two pages and two questions of the study discuss the representation of urban Aboriginal peoples. The first question reported on perceptions of Aboriginal political organizations. Fewer than half of Aboriginal peoples surveyed said that Aboriginal organizations represent them very well and somewhat well. The second question reported on who best represents urban Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal political organizations or Canadian political parties. In terms of a political organization that best represents them, just over one-quarter indicated that national Aboriginal organizations represent them best and just over one-quarter indicated that national political parties best represent them. As well, just over one-quarter indicated that no one political organizations best represents them (95).

Aboriginal peoples have contact with the following non-Aboriginal services and organizations (in order from most frequent): banks/credit unions; health care system; elementary/secondary schools as a parent; social assistance programs; employment/training services; social housing programs; and the child welfare system (81). While over six in ten of those surveyed who have accessed social housing programs say their experience was positive, nearly three in ten reported that it was negative. Regarding experiences with social assistance programs, six in ten reported positive experiences, while three in ten indicated that their experiences were negative (82). The most common concern reported by four out of ten respondents regarding negative experiences with non-Aboriginal services is being treated poorly because of: racism or discrimination; disrespect; and staff that were judgmental, rude, lacked empathy, did not understand their culture, or did not believe them (84). A large majority of Aboriginal peoples believe that it is very important to have Aboriginal services regardless of whether they are users or non-users of non-Aboriginal services. This is considered to be most important for addiction programs, child and family services and housing services and very important for employment, health and child care centres (85).

Discussion

This discussion will analyze the extent to which critical issues identified by RCAP (challenges to cultural identity, exclusion from opportunities for self-determination, discrimination and difficulty of finding culturally appropriate services) are considered relevant today by their incorporation in the UAPS. Overall, the UAPS reported on Aboriginal peoples from all socio-economic strata in urban centres. This shifts the focus for selecting socio-economic indicators for Aboriginal peoples in urban centres that highlight their marginalization and high mobility rates. But this should not downplay the realities of despair that a significant number of Aboriginal peoples face in urban centres.

Challenges to cultural identity –Cultural identity is highly positive for Aboriginal peoples living in urban centres with a strong majority indicating pride in being indigenous. A strong majority also indicated that the residential school experience has impacted on their lives today.

Exclusion from opportunities for self-determination The survey asks Aboriginal people if they engage in political activities, both Aboriginal and Canadian politics. It does not ask them if they are involved at any level in Aboriginal or Canadian political organizations. Compared to questions about their engagement in the current justice system and attitudes toward an Aboriginal justice system or traditional Aboriginal health practices, there were no questions about Aboriginal attitudes toward Aboriginal political engagement. This leaves out a question about the extent to which Aboriginal people participate in political processes regarding traditional practices. The study indicates that Aboriginal peoples in urban centres are represented by Aboriginal organizations and Canadian political parties. In this sense Aboriginal peoples are politically active but the UAPS does not inform us of Aboriginal political participation which is crucial for assessing self-determination. UAPS reported that Aboriginal peoples are involved with political organizations so there is potential for political mobilization

Discrimination-Even though Aboriginal peoples feel accepted by non-Aboriginal people a strong majority representing all socio-demographic groups agree that others behave negatively toward them and that they have been insulted because of their Aboriginal background.

Difficulty of finding culturally appropriate services- Access to traditional healing practices is more important than access to mainstream health care for over half of the Aboriginal participants that were surveyed, while over one-quarter indicated that traditional practices are more important (116). There is a strong response from Aboriginal people between incorporating Aboriginal concepts of justice and Aboriginal cultural values as shaping participation in the criminal justice system. A large majority of Aboriginal peoples believe that it is very important to have Aboriginal services regardless of whether they are users or non-users of non-Aboriginal services. This is considered to be most important in the case of addiction programs, child and family services and housing services and very important in the case of Aboriginal employment centres, Aboriginal health centres and Aboriginal child care centres (85).

Conclusion

The number of people who identify as Aboriginal is growing faster than the non-Aboriginal population and more than half of Aboriginal peoples live in urban centres. The study of Aboriginal peoples in urban centres as a group generally accentuates low socio-economic status and high mobility rates. This paper originally planned to go beyond the statistics to capture the actual experiences of urban Aboriginal peoples. The publication of the UAPS provided an opportunity to analyze how critical issues as identified by RCAP are addressed in the present day for Aboriginal peoples in urban centres. For the most part UAPS revealed that Aboriginal peoples possess a positive cultural identity. Impacting on Aboriginal identity are the residential school experience and the effects of discrimination by mainstream society. UAPS reported strong support for alternative forms of justice and traditional health practices. In regards to

political participation UAPS focused on the representation of Aboriginal peoples in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal political organizations, but avoided questions regarding Aboriginal participation in political organizations. There are findings that Aboriginal peoples want to engage in institutions and services that accommodate traditional practices. To this end self-determination is located as a means of including Aboriginal peoples in decisions affecting their traditional practices such as alternative forms of justice and traditional health practices. Future surveys should consider monitoring Aboriginal political inclusion and participation as a critical issue for Aboriginal peoples living in urban centres in Canada.

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