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## The Search for Belonging: Perspectives of Youth

Our vision is to be happy. We want to relax and have dreams and laugh. We want to love and talk. We want more Indian counsellors. We want nobody to hurt us and make fun of us. We want to feel safe. We want our own police. We want a justice system that works. We want to know our Native culture. We want to respect each other. We have to have a better future.

Robert Quill  
Coldwater Band School  
Merritt, British Columbia, 5 November 1992\*

### 1. The Vision of Aboriginal Youth

**YOUNG ABORIGINAL PEOPLE** are deeply concerned about the future because it is their future. They speak of concerns rooted in the here and now, with an eye to what can be done today to build a better tomorrow.

The Commission's terms of reference instructed us to investigate and make concrete recommendations concerning the situation of Aboriginal youth. We heard from hundreds of young people — at our public hearings, through written submissions, through specially convened youth circles, and during visits to schools, child care centres and many other facilities. In addition, the Commission's research division included a youth team to focus on the issues and concerns of young Aboriginal people. Through these many channels, the Commission attempted to come to grips with the hopes, dreams and fears of Inuit, First Nations and Métis youth.

We were encouraged to see that Aboriginal youth, when presented with a problem, immediately tend to look for solutions that are practical and feasible, and that will work at the community level. It became clear that for young Aboriginal men and women, community development is not about infrastructure, but about people, and about building a stronger community. By and large, they are not concerned with perceived political or administrative impediments; they do not worry about overlapping jurisdictions, competing programs or other bureaucratic hurdles. They feel these political obstacles are immaterial, creations of a system that has largely failed Aboriginal people.

Politically and culturally, many Aboriginal youth identify with an Aboriginal nation. When they gather, they are not concerned about who has 'Indian' status — or how they acquired it — and who does not, about who lives on-reserve and who does not. They do

not identify with labels fabricated for administrative purposes by governments. They are first and foremost Mi'kmaq, or Inuit, or Métis or Sauteaux — they are members of an Aboriginal nation. They want organizations that represent their true nationhood.

Yet they recognize that, as Aboriginal people, they have common bonds. They share the legacy of a colonial past. Their peers and their communities face many of the same challenges. They are willing to work together to address the common concerns of Aboriginal peoples everywhere. They would like their organizations to share in this co-operative effort:

You know, we don't need money all the time. What we need is our nation, our people, our communities to come together as one and to work together as one, to sit down and say, "Okay, this is what we've got to do". The government is obviously not doing anything, so we'll just never mind the government for now. We'll shift that off to the side....It's our people who are in trouble. We have to work as one people, one nation. We must do that. It's extremely important.

Stan Wesley  
Moose Factory Youth Group  
Moose Factory, Ontario, 9 June 1992

Youth believe in themselves as Aboriginal people, and believe that this identity is within them wherever they go. They assert that their rights are not restricted to a reserve or traditional homeland, but remain with them no matter where they choose to live. The term 'community' appears often in this chapter. It is used in the broadest sense. It is not simply a physical space; it refers to any group of people who share ways of being together. Hundreds of distinct Aboriginal communities are identified on the map, yet there are many hundreds of equally distinct communities that are not identified by borders. There are communities of students, of co-workers, in prisons, and on the streets of urban Canada.

Aboriginal youth spoke to the Commission about many issues from fresh and unique perspectives. It would be a mistake to try to compress these voices into a single note or tone. But all Aboriginal young people have at least some common concerns. They are the current generation paying the price of cultural genocide, racism and poverty, suffering the effects of hundreds of years of colonialist public policies. The problems that most Aboriginal communities endure are of such depth and scope that they have created remarkably similar situations and responses among Aboriginal youth everywhere. It is as though an earthquake has ruptured their world from one end to another, opening a deep rift that separates them from their past, their history and their culture. They have seen parents and peers fall into this chasm, into patterns of despair, listlessness and self-destruction. They fear for themselves and their future as they stand at the edge.

Yet Aboriginal youth can see across this great divide. Their concern about the current crisis is leavened with a vision of a better tomorrow. They spoke often of empowerment, a process brought on by healing and community development:

In our society the practice of self-cleansing was deemed an honourable ritual which was not confined only to the individual, but also practised at the clan and community level. To begin our healing process as Aboriginal people we must first undergo a cleansing process. We must begin prioritizing the issues that will require our utmost efforts and resources. We feel the most important resource base we have as Aboriginal people is our people.

Carol Gauthier  
Shingwauk Anishinabek Student Society  
Algoma University  
Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, 11 June 1992

Through empowerment, individuals become mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy. They come to recognize themselves as valuable members of the community. They work to make their community stronger, and in doing so they help other members of the community empower themselves. The process is a continuum or circle — the symbol common to many Aboriginal cultures. How to achieve the empowerment of Aboriginal youth and communities was a central preoccupation for the young people who spoke to the Commission. It is the primary focus of this chapter, which is based largely on the words of Aboriginal youth. But because of its implications for future generations, the chapter speaks to the concerns of all Aboriginal people, regardless of age.

## **2. The Reality for Aboriginal Youth: An Overview of Current Conditions**

### **2.1 An Aboriginal Youth Profile**

The majority of Aboriginal people in Canada — 56.2 per cent, or some 405,200 people — are under the age of 25.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, only 7.3 per cent are 55 years of age or older. For societies struggling to reclaim their traditional languages and ways of life, this puts tremendous pressure on the older generations.

The Aboriginal population in Canada is much younger than the non-Aboriginal population. Children — from newborns to age 14 — make up 36.5 per cent of the Aboriginal population but only 21.1 per cent of the Canadian population. Youth — those 15 to 24 years of age — account for 14.2 per cent of the Canadian population but 19.8 per cent of the Aboriginal population (see Table 4.1). This definition of youth is consistent with that used by Statistics Canada, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. When citing statistics in this chapter, we adhere to a strict definition of children, that is, people up to the age of 14. When not citing statistics, we use such terms as 'young Aboriginal people' and 'Aboriginal youth' to apply to all Aboriginal people under the age of 25.

TABLE 4.1  
**Age Distribution of the Aboriginal Identity and Canadian Populations, 1991**

Age Group	Aboriginal <sup>1</sup>	Canadian <sup>2</sup>
	%	%
0-14 years	36.5	21.1
15-24 years	19.8	14.2
25-34 years	18.5	17.9
35-54 years	17.9	27.1
55+ years	7.3	19.7

Notes:

1. Figures have been adjusted to account for undercoverage of the population. For a more complete discussion see Volume 1, Chapter 2, and M.J. Norris et al., "Projections of the Population With Aboriginal Identity in Canada, 1991-2016", research study prepared by Statistics Canada for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (February 1995).

2. Includes Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal persons.

Source: Statistics Canada, "Mother Tongue: 20% Sample Data", Catalogue no. 93-333, 1992.

The urban context is crucial to understanding the present situation of Aboriginal youth. Almost half (45 per cent) of all Aboriginal people under age 25 live in non-reserve urban centres (defined as a population of at least 1,000 and a density of 400 people per square kilometre; for purposes of the Commission's work, urban areas exclude reserves that may be within the geopolitical boundaries of urban areas). Of these, the majority (40.4 per cent) live in urban areas with populations of more than 100,000 — cities such as Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Vancouver.<sup>2</sup> Well over half the status and non-status Indian and Métis youth in urban areas live in large cities.<sup>3</sup> The exception is Inuit youth, almost 80 per cent of whom live in northern communities; of Inuit youth in urban areas, 21.2 per cent live in large cities.

The number of young Aboriginal people in urban areas varies from city to city. The 1991 Aboriginal peoples survey indicated that there were 3,260 Aboriginal people under the age of 25 in the Ottawa-Hull area. Winnipeg, a city known for its large Aboriginal population, had more than 20,000 young Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal youth population of Edmonton was reported as about 17,000, while in other large cities the numbers ranged from 5,000 to 10,000.<sup>4</sup>

A gradual greying of the Aboriginal population will occur over the long term. The current birth rate is much lower than it was in the 1960s. The proportion of the Aboriginal population 14 years of age and under is expected to decline from 36.5 per cent in 1991 to 24.4 per cent in 2016. The age group from 15 to 24 will stay at 20 per cent until the turn of the century, but will gradually drop to 16 per cent by 2016. In terms of numbers, this population will rise from an estimated 142,400 in 1991 to a projected high of 189,100 by the year 2011, and will then fall to 175,500 by 2016. Demographically, Aboriginal youth will remain a significant force. In 2011, those aged 20 to 24 will represent the largest five-year age group in the Aboriginal population (98,900), and those aged 15 to 19 the second-largest (90,200).

## 2.2 The Importance of Listening to Aboriginal Youth

A lot of things that have been put in place for youth don't work because they haven't consulted youth themselves. It is time for us to start doing things as young people because no one is going to do it for us. We can't wait for the government or the community to do things. We have to work with them.

Tonya Makletzoff  
Yellowknife, Northwest Territories  
10 December 1992

Youth, it seems, are somewhat wary of government-designed solutions, even those of Aboriginal governments. In the past, programs designed to assist them have been scattered and often misdirected. They feel their concerns are not taken seriously by their leaders and their communities. When they speak out, their voices go unheard. Feeling marginalized, excluded or devalued, some have lost faith in their communities. Aboriginal governments have to become more accountable to their communities and to youth. Through hundreds of hours of testimony and thousands of pages of presentations to the Commission, it became clear that the priorities of youth are healing, education, employment, culture and identity, and recognition of and involvement in the institutions that affect their lives. Their numbers in the population of today and their role in shaping and leading their communities and nations tomorrow make it essential for governments — Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike — to listen to their concerns and act on their priorities.

### **3. Toward Whole Health**

We know, Grandfather, that you gave us a sacred power,  
But it seems like we didn't know its purpose.  
So now we've learned as we sat together:  
The name of the power is Love —  
Invincible, irresistible, overwhelming power.  
The power you gave us we are going to use.  
We'll dry the tears of those who cry  
And heal the hurts of them that are hurting.  
Yes, Grandmother,

We'll give you our hands,  
And our hearts and our minds and our bodies.  
We dedicate our lives to affirmation.  
We will not wait nor hesitate.  
And as we walk on this sacred earth,  
We will learn together to celebrate  
The ways of peace, and harmony, and tranquillity That come  
From diminishing that negative, evil power within us And in the world around us.  
Thank you, Grandfather, for this prayer.

#### **3.1 The Need for Whole Health**

This prayer opened Youth Forum — A Voice for the Future, held in the Inuit community of Hopedale, Labrador, in February 1993.<sup>5</sup> Hopedale and its neighbour to the north, the Innu community of Davis Inlet, are among the many Aboriginal communities still struggling to wrest from the government of Canada basic services that were promised decades ago. Years of neglect have left today's youth in need of not just physical amenities but also holistic healing that focuses on the four pillars of the individual's being: spirit, mind, body and emotions. Unless a holistic approach is taken, the despair that has gripped Aboriginal communities will not let go.

A recent example is illustrative. Davis Inlet gained national prominence in January 1993 when television stations across the country broadcast videotape images of six youths attempting suicide. Canadians were shocked, and rightly so. In all, 17 youths — including the six who had attempted suicide — needed urgent treatment for the substance abuse that was destroying them, and they were eventually taken to the Poundmaker Lodge in Alberta. Yet when the youth returned to the community, many resumed substance abuse. Their bodies had been healed, but there was nothing to nourish their minds, emotions or spirits. To have a lasting effect, healing must address not only individuals but also the community. The initiative to heal must come from and be rooted in the community. These are perhaps the most important lessons of the Davis Inlet experience.

Healing is the first step on the road to empowerment. Youth believe that this healing process builds the strength they need to face all other challenges:

We feel that the healing will come from within the community. Along with a realistic resource base, we have the tools to heal our people.

Desmond Peters Jr.  
Student, Aboriginal Governments Program, University of Victoria  
Victoria, British Columbia, 22 May 1992

In many Aboriginal societies, the Medicine Wheel is the symbol of holistic healing, embodying the four elements of whole health:

- spiritual health, which can mean many things, depending on the individual's approach to spirituality, and may include participating in ceremonies, gaining traditional knowledge, and exploring spiritual heritage;
- mental health, which includes education, knowledge of Aboriginal history and cultural contributions, and activities that promote self-confidence;
- physical health, including nutrition, sports and recreation, and cultural activities; and
- emotional health, gained through access to sharing circles, counsellors and elders.

A return to traditional forms of healing is not regression but a resumption of the path that sustained Aboriginal people and nations for generations. The Commission recognizes,

however, that reintroducing traditional healing methods can cause tension in communities and must therefore be done with community support and with great sensitivity.

Youth have begun to benefit already from a holistic approach to healing at several locations. Young women's teachings are offered at Matootoo Lake, a site for traditional healing near the Peguis First Nation in Manitoba. Matootoo Lake was chosen because traditional teachers and elders say that healers used to come to the area to pick medicinal plants and build sweat lodges. (Matootoo is the Ojibwa word for sweat lodge.) The teachings offered at Matootoo Lake prepare young women for the emotional, physical and spiritual transition to womanhood. A major goal of the program is to reduce unplanned pregnancies by helping young women acquire confidence in their ability to deal with sexuality. A parallel program for boys is designed to enhance their self-esteem, develop respect for girls and women and raise awareness of issues such as violence against women. The program has a great deal of local credibility, and the demand for services outstrips availability.<sup>6</sup>

Culture, sports and recreation, counsellors, peers, elders, parents, family and governments all play a role in healing Aboriginal communities. When approaches to healing address the individual and the community holistically, whole healing can take place. We discuss the holistic approach to healing at greater length in Volume 3, Chapter 3.

We turn now to approaches that will enable youth to heal themselves and find the spiritual, mental, physical and emotional health they seek.

### **3.2 Spiritual Health**

The first time I heard the drum it was like a magnet pulling me to it. When I hear the drum and the songs it makes me want to get up and dance. When you're near the drum you can feel it in your heart because it's your heartbeat. It's only natural for a person to want to dance because it is the first sound you hear — your mother's heartbeat.

Vera Wabegijic  
National Youth Representative  
National Association of Friendship Centres  
Ottawa, Ontario, 5 November 1993

For many Aboriginal people, spiritual health is directly related to reclaiming their traditions, culture and language. During the Commission's hearings, Aboriginal youth spoke more often about culture and identity than about anything else in the Commission's mandate. The research studies and youth circles sponsored by the Commission revealed these themes as well. No matter where the community, no matter who the speaker, Aboriginal youth spoke with a single voice about what culture means to them and about its place in the healing process. Cultural identity imbues all four areas of healing.

Understanding themselves as Aboriginal people is important to youth because it directly affects their self-esteem, which in turn affects their motivation to strive for a better tomorrow. Aboriginal youth have been bombarded by negative images of their people: inaccurate portrayals in the media, in old (and not so old) movies and television shows,

and in school curricula that distort or ignore the contributions of Aboriginal cultures. They also face day-to-day, street-level racism and government and public policies that continue to devalue Aboriginal people and culture. They see members of their communities ravaged by substance abuse and physical abuse and they wonder, is that what it means to be an Aboriginal person?

The importance of a secure sense of identity cannot and should not be downplayed or dismissed. Identity confusion or lack of identity is a major risk factor for suicidal behaviour among young Aboriginal people, as we pointed out in *Choosing Life: Special report on suicide among Aboriginal people*:

In speaking to Commissioners, Aboriginal youth described both exclusion from the dominant society and alienation from the now idealized but once-real 'life on the land' that is stereotypically associated with aboriginality. The terrible emptiness of feeling strung between two cultures and psychologically at home in neither has been described in fiction and in art, as well as in testimony given before the Commission. If they have few positive role models or clear paths to follow, Aboriginal youth may be forced to turn to one another, building tight bonds against a hostile world. Their inward-looking subculture may reinforce hopelessness and self-hate, and their only exits may appear to be the oblivion of drugs and alcohol — or death.<sup>7</sup>

Giving Aboriginal youth the opportunity to learn about their language, culture and traditional values teaches them that they are valid and valued individuals and that they can be proud — not ashamed — of their culture and the contributions Aboriginal people have made. Youth who gain a positive sense of self come to see their future as worth fighting for. Grounded in their culture, they can work as Aboriginal people to make a better tomorrow:

When I hear elders talking about our culture and traditions, it moves me. Their words strengthen me and inspire me. The teachings that have been passed on to me help me along the path I have chosen. It helps focus my mind and encourages me to do my best every day.

Vera Wabegijic  
National Youth Representative  
National Association of Friendship Centres  
Ottawa, Ontario, 5 November 1993

Four key themes emerged from what youth told the Commission regarding culture:

- the loss of culture and identity through denial and suppression;
- the importance of language;
- the role of parents and elders; and
- the challenge of moulding non-Aboriginal institutions to reflect Aboriginal values.



Aboriginal youth know their culture is more profound than a lifestyle, that it taps into the very heart of their people and their spirituality. Yet they feel their cultures are threatened, and they cling to them as the key to survival. Many feel that the traditions defining their identity are being forgotten by all but a few elders:

Many of our parents think they are worthless. Many of them do not have the heart to serve as a stable source of love and discipline. We are experiencing a breakdown in traditional family values. We are not making human beings human. Educate us to be a guide, a friend, a companion to our parents, our people and to all Canadians. Children have dreams. Children trust grown-ups. Please don't let us down.

Tara Lindsay  
Iqaluit, Northwest Territories  
25 May 1992

I have a grandfather who is 80 years old and I have been growing up with him for my 18 years. I cannot speak my language. I try. But I love him more than anything, and there's communication there....you can feel the love between us and I can rub his hand and we know we understand each other. But there is something missing when we cannot listen to the stories they have to tell, or explain how you are feeling about something. And it's very frustrating for me, knowing that this very important part of my culture is being lost.

Christina Delaney  
Moosonee, Ontario  
10 June 1992

This sense of loss coloured virtually every statement that youth made to the Commission. For some it was the focus of their message. For others, the sense of loss was muted or overwhelmed by strong cultural pride. Our hearings often revealed these two poles: the devastation felt among youth in Aboriginal communities, and the yearning for identity through a revived and invigorated culture. This duality is played out in the lives of many young Aboriginal people.

One of the Commission's research projects revealed this yearning for identity through 'Sonny', a young Aboriginal man who abused alcohol and drugs.<sup>8</sup> Sonny eventually rediscovered his sense of self through identification with his culture. At a Native Friendship Centre he was introduced to songs, dances, ceremonies and other cultural practices. Eventually Sonny was able to turn his life around, through renewed pride and self-esteem. His culture was like a key, unlocking his capacity to heal himself.

Like Sonny, many Aboriginal youth who come into conflict with the law are either unaware of their cultural roots or seeking to find them. The over-representation of Aboriginal youth in the justice system suggests other problems, including high unemployment and a perceived lack of opportunity, the absence of positive role models, low self-esteem, and the effects of racism and cultural devaluation.

Youth interviewed as part of a Commission research project said they were proud of their culture, but most of them did not even know their culture until they were exposed to it at

the Edmonton Young Offenders Centre.<sup>9</sup> It is both sad and ironic that some youth discover their culture only behind the walls of a prison. 'Missy', a former street youth in Vancouver, asked: "Why are counselling and Aboriginal culture suddenly provided after youth have landed on the street? It gives kids the wrong message — if you're behaving yourself, you're doing okay in school, you're at home and you don't run away...you don't deserve these things".<sup>10</sup>

### *The urban context*

We believe our heritage, culture and religion are what make us human beings. It is very difficult in the city to learn these things because many of the knowledgeable people who know about it and can help us with it don't live here. We must have help and resources so that we can reach out to these people and build connections between us and them.

Jolene Wasteste  
Regina, Saskatchewan  
10 May 1993

The search for culture and identity can be especially difficult in urban areas. Aboriginal youth living in cities face different challenges in trying to heal themselves. They are a minority in a sea of cultures. They must seek out or create their own communities to develop a sense of who they are as Aboriginal people:

You are living two lifestyles when you live off-reserve....I was brought up to know two cultures, but I am one or the other. I am always thought of as one or the other.

Judie Acquin  
Fredericton, New Brunswick  
16 June 1993

Some Aboriginal youth were born in the city, but over the years there has also been substantial migration of Aboriginal people from rural or reserve communities to urban areas. Young people leave their communities for many reasons: their parents move, they decide to flee abusive situations, they want a higher quality of secondary education than is available closer to home, or they enter post-secondary institutions.

Urban youth do not want to be seen as traitors to their home communities. Many have a deep commitment to helping strengthen and enrich their communities. In some cases, they would stay if the community offered them the opportunities they seek. But to gain the necessary skills and resources — through education, work, and health care — they sometimes have to move to an urban environment for at least a few years. For some, the city becomes their community.

Once in the city, they find new pressures and challenges. Substance abuse is one of the most pervasive problems facing Aboriginal youth. Like the high rates of incarceration, however, substance abuse is symptomatic of a deeper malaise: loss of identity and low self-esteem. In urban centres these feelings can be amplified if there is no readily apparent Aboriginal community to turn to for support.

While trying to come to grips with their Aboriginal identity, Aboriginal youth are bombarded with the images and sounds of the dominant society. Television and advertising seldom include Aboriginal content, while satellites beam images of non-Aboriginal culture into homes in remote areas across the country. Non-Aboriginal culture pervades the life of Aboriginal youth.

Youth in smaller communities are exposed to non-Aboriginal culture through television, educational curricula and teachers. But youth in urban centres are surrounded by it. They live and experience it directly. While some can balance an urban lifestyle with their traditions and culture, others feel they are drowning in the mainstream.

### ***Culture and identity***

Youth told the Commission that they must have opportunities to explore and live their culture. Not all want to return to a traditional lifestyle; for many, especially those living in cities, this is highly unlikely. Yet they want to learn about the values and beliefs of their people and what it means to be an Aboriginal person in the modern world. They want to learn Aboriginal languages and celebrate their cultures through traditional practices and ceremonies. This need not be done to the exclusion of non-Aboriginal culture. Cultures are not static; they evolve over time. Young people want to learn the values and wisdom that sustained their ancestors long ago — values and wisdom they can use to guide their behaviour in today's world. They want to face the future as Aboriginal people.

The home is where such practices and values are traditionally transmitted. But some youth told the Commission that their parents no longer have the necessary knowledge. Elders and support networks, where they exist and when they can be located, can help. There is a need for facilities and programs where youth can gather and learn. This is particularly important for those who are making the transition from reserves or remote communities to the city. Youth recommended to the Commission that a variety of facilities to meet their cultural needs be established.

Among their suggestions was to set up Aboriginal youth centres. These centres would be a co-operative effort among community leaders, educators and government officials to give young people the qualities and skills needed to be leaders in the community. Aboriginal elders and others recognized as knowledgeable in the culture should have a role in planning and implementing programs. The centres would combine voluntarism and government-funded programs to enhance traditional knowledge and skills, offer enhanced academic and technical training, expose youth to professional and government environments, and foster a spirit of service. In cities, the centres should also provide counselling and support for youth moving from home communities to the urban environment.

The centres should, as much as possible, use existing resources in order to limit financial dependence. They could be established in existing facilities such as friendship centres, community centres, cultural centres and schools.

## Recommendation

The Commission recommends that

### 4.4.1

Youth centres be established on reserves and in communities, including urban communities, where there is a significant Aboriginal population. Where cultural centres exist they should develop a specific youth component, including cultural and recreational programs.

In Chapter 7 of this volume, we recommend a number of ways to support and enhance Aboriginal cultural identity in urban areas. One recommendation is that land dedicated to Aboriginal cultural and spiritual needs be set aside in urban areas. Where feasible, youth centres could be established on or near this land.

Young Aboriginal people also spoke of the need for youth shelters or facilities to provide a safe place for youth suffering from mental, emotional and physical abuse — with counsellors to help them deal with the difficult years of adolescence and young adulthood:

I believe right now in my community there is too much violence, there is too much death, suicide. With these kinds of things, I don't see why the federal government or the provincial government can't come up with a crisis centre for this kind of problem.

Randy Nepoose  
Hobbema, Alberta, 10 June 1992

They want shelters that offer cultural activities and programs that build self-esteem and provide a sense of belonging. Youth centres can meet some of these needs, as can the Aboriginal healing lodges and healing centres we recommended in Volume 3, Chapter 3.

Aboriginal youth also recommended youth camps — places where they can get back to the land and learn about themselves and their culture. Rediscovery Camps provide one model. The first, on Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands), in British Columbia, was launched in 1978. It was established under the guidance of local elders as a way to combat growing problems of substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and family disruption.

Rediscovery Camps now constitute a broad network of affiliated programs spanning several countries, including Canada, the United States and New Zealand. They are generally for youth between eight and 17 years of age and have a mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants. They take place in wilderness areas near participants' home communities. The youth are taken out on the land for a week or more to learn survival and wilderness skills and traditional ways. The skills are relevant to the local environment; if the camp is near water, for instance, fishing and canoeing may be emphasized.

A unique feature of the camps is the emphasis on traditional knowledge. Members of the local community participate as guides, cooks or group leaders, and elders play an integral role as well:

Native elders naturally assume the respected head position of a Rediscovery extended family. The original organizers felt that the elders would benefit the program most through their songs, stories, crafts, and skills. In addition to this, the elders have proven to be the program's most effective counsellors, transcending any generation gap between themselves and the coolest of teenagers...[Elders] appear as loving and caring grandparents — which is exactly what they are.<sup>11</sup>

The elders ensure the traditional knowledge and skills imparted are authentic — another key feature of the Rediscovery model.

The camp has taught me so much for being grateful for the beauty of this earth, respect for mother nature, and respect for my elders.<sup>12</sup>

Rediscovery Camps bring together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth to increase understanding and awareness and to build bridges between cultures. Of course, some Aboriginal youth know as little about Aboriginal cultures as non-Aboriginal youth do. For those looking to learn about themselves, Rediscovery provides an opportunity to learn about their culture in a traditional environment. Any Aboriginal community could adapt the Rediscovery model for its own youth, incorporating a strong focus on its own culture and traditional practices.

This is already happening in some communities. The Avataq Cultural Institute in Nunavik, the Inuit territory in northern Quebec, runs a traditional Inuit summer camp in Inukjuak. In New Brunswick there is a summer camp that provides cultural enrichment for Maliseet and Mi'kmaq students. These initiatives and the Rediscovery Camps provide models for communities wishing to pass on traditional knowledge in a traditional way.

## **Recommendation**

The Commission recommends that

### **4.4.2**

Federal, provincial and territorial governments provide funding for community initiatives to establish Aboriginal youth camps that would

(a) pursue cultural activities linking youth with elders through the development of traditional skills and knowledge;

(b) promote a healthy lifestyle (counselling, fitness and nutrition); and

(c) encourage positive social interaction between Aboriginal youth of different nations and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth.

These camps would provide an excellent way to begin to establish cultural identity and to instil the confidence Aboriginal youth will need to confront the challenge of rebuilding their communities. Each young person will have to choose his or her own path to healing. But establishing cultural identity should be considered a priority and a major step in the healing process.

Communities, too, must direct their own healing, but they often need support. No one magic recipe will work in all communities; each must establish its own needs and find the methods and type of support to address those needs. Activities such as drumming and dance groups, pow-wows, language classes, and youth and elder gatherings have all been helpful in spiritual healing by various communities. Yet, the "unfortunate reality is that these vital activities are the types of initiatives that governments seldom fund. These are the soft areas, the intangible areas, at least as considered by government officials, because their results appear hard to measure".<sup>13</sup> What is not difficult to measure, though, is the devastation that results when youth do not have access to such activities.

### **3.3 A Healthy Mind**

Aboriginal youth who spoke to the Commission told us that education is the key that unlocks the door to the future — a future where Aboriginal nations will be prosperous, self-determining entities. Youth feel that education has two purposes: to build and enhance their understanding of themselves as Aboriginal people; and to prepare them for life in the modern world. They want to acquire traditional knowledge and skills, but they also want to be educated in accounting, engineering, physiology, business administration and many other fields. The two kinds of knowledge are complementary; youth armed with a quality education can take their place as Aboriginal people in the modern world.

#### *Language and education*

I believe that all Aboriginal people should be able to speak their own language because it gives them a sense of pride of who we are as Aboriginal people. I also feel that the younger generation should learn how to speak the language because it is part of our identity and culture. Our language is our last means as to who we are as Native people. As an individual, I truly wish I could speak Ojibwa. Not knowing my language makes me feel sad because I am not able to communicate with people who speak the language. However, I am working on it. Whenever I go to my grandparents' home, they usually speak to me in our language. My mother is also teaching us what she knows. I am paying more attention in our Ojibwa classes taught to us in school.

Jill Henderson  
Fort Alexander, Manitoba  
30 October 1992

Aboriginal youth who want to reclaim their culture recognize that culture begins with language. Many Aboriginal people told the Commission that without the language, the culture will be lost:

Language is the essence of a culture. Languages are vehicles for the transmission of values, culture and literature. They shape perceptions, an understanding of self, culture, heritage and world view.

Mary Noey  
La Ronge, Saskatchewan  
28 May 1992

Maintaining Aboriginal language is easier in northern communities than it is in other parts of the country. Only 8.6 per cent of Aboriginal children in southern Canada can speak an Aboriginal language (see Volume 3, Chapter 5).

Preserving and reviving Aboriginal languages will take the combined efforts of individuals, families and community institutions. Youth recognize that some parents did not pass on an Aboriginal language because they thought English or French was the language of the future. Many of these parents were raised in an environment where Aboriginal languages were not valued by the dominant culture — indeed, were actively suppressed in some cases. Youth today realize that language is the glue that holds cultures together; languages must not only be preserved, they must be kept alive.

Aboriginal youth want their languages respected in the educational system and in the community at large. Nunavik is a good model. There, under the Kativik School Board, Inuktitut is the first language of instruction in the early grades and is taught as a subject in the upper grades. Inuktitut is heard up to six or seven hours a day on radio, and the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation works with regional bodies to produce five and a half hours of Inuktitut programming each week. Regional magazines, newsletters and official reports are printed in Inuktitut. The Kativik School Board has developed curriculum material to support oral and written language instruction.

This approach to language and language education is no doubt easier to implement in an Aboriginal people's home territory where there is a single linguistic tradition. In centres where more than one language is used — particularly in urban areas — it is more of a challenge to provide language support for everyone. In Vancouver, parents who want their children to learn an Aboriginal language through the school system can approach the school board with an application for a locally developed course. They can also suggest the name of a member of the linguistic community who is recognized as an Aboriginal language teacher by the B.C. College of Teachers. The course need not be taught in the classroom; it can be home-based or in a community setting.

Aboriginal students want their languages given the same status as English and French in the educational system. They want to be able to learn their languages in schools and to receive recognition and credit for their efforts. Some said that Aboriginal students should be given the option of studying their own language in lieu of French or English — in school, at home or in the community (as in the Vancouver model). This could be done in co-operation with local friendship centres, community centres or, where they exist, Aboriginal language associations.

The revival of Aboriginal languages should be recognized as an integral component of healthy communities. The revitalization of the indigenous languages of North America should be supported by efforts such as those we recommend in Volume 3, Chapters 5 and 6. Wherever possible, institutions serving Aboriginal people should use the relevant language or languages.

### *Culturally appropriate education*

Education can be an agent of cultural survival or cultural disintegration. Recognizing the significant role of educational institutions, Aboriginal youth feel the time has come for Aboriginal communities to control these institutions. In fact, Aboriginal peoples have been calling for Aboriginal control of education — and community involvement in the education of their youth — since at least 1972, when the National Indian Brotherhood presented its landmark policy paper, *Indian Control of Indian Education* to the minister of Indian affairs.

Education can be used to pass on the values and customs of the community. Children can be infused with their culture and grow to become healthy, valuable, contributing members of society. The word education derives from the Latin, *educere*, which means to draw out; education should draw out what exists in the child. Yet in the past, education was used to crush what exists in the Aboriginal child:

Unfortunately, the system of education that the Innu received from the non-Innu society has contributed very much to the disintegration of the Innu society.<sup>14</sup>

I remember my first day of school when the bus was coming....My mother had me all ready. My hair was braided. I had red ribbons....I stood at the road and it was a big day and I was afraid. My mother said, "Here comes the bus. You will be all right, Sherry Lynn. And remember — try to act like them." That's what she told me.

Sherry Lawson  
Orillia, Ontario  
13 May 1993

I see this as genocide. What better way to kill a people than to rob them of their chance for a good education, taking away the opportunity for us to make something of ourselves.

Lisa Raven  
Hollow Water Band, Wanipigow School  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, 23 April 1992

Some youth would prefer schools set up by and for Aboriginal people. They see such schools as refuges from racism and from mainstream educators, some of whom are ignorant of Aboriginal culture and its importance to youth. When asked why Aboriginal students were failing in the Vancouver school district, one teacher replied, "When are natives going to realize that they need to give up their culture and join the rest of society?"<sup>15</sup>



Learning about and reviving traditions does not mean turning back the clock. Students, and youth in general, simply want to know themselves as Aboriginal people and to use cultural values to guide them in today's world. It is no surprise that Aboriginal students in that same Vancouver school district, when asked what keeps them from completing secondary studies, responded with remarks such as "ashamed and embarrassed to be Indian", "racism", "alcohol and drug abuse", and "no support from home". Parents responded, "Schools do not prepare our children for life in our culture or life in today's society".<sup>16</sup>

Parents and grandparents certainly have a role in transmitting culture; in some cases, however, they may not have the knowledge necessary to do so. The reality is that, for many, both the problem and the solution are in the classroom.

Unfortunately, Aboriginal children are not staying in school, and their level of formal education lags behind that of the general population. As shown in Table 4.2, compared to the general Canadian population, fewer Aboriginal youth complete their studies at any level of the education system. Among Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24 not attending school, 68.5 per cent did not complete high school, and once Aboriginal youth drop out of school they are less likely to return; two-thirds of Aboriginal men and 60 per cent of Aboriginal women aged 15 to 24 do not complete high school or take adult upgrading after dropping out.

TABLE 4.2

**Aboriginal Identity and Canadian Populations Aged 15-24 No Longer Attending School, by Highest Level of Education, 1991**

Level of Education	Aboriginal <sup>1</sup>	Canadian
	%	%
Grade 8 or Less	15.8	5.4
High school (no certificate)	42.7	31.5
High school certificate	15.5	26.3
Non-university (no certificate) <sup>2</sup>	11.3	9.6
Non-university certificate	7.4	15.0
University (no degree)	5.9	7.9
University degree	0.6	4.4

Notes:

1. Includes Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal persons not attending school full-time.

2. Such as a trade school offering plumbing, carpentry certification, etc.

Source: For Aboriginal identity population, Statistics Canada, 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, custom tabulations, 1994; for Canadian population, Statistics Canada, 1991 Census, "Educational Attainment and School Attendance", Catalogue no. 93-328, 1991.

For Aboriginal youth, remaining in school can be a lonely, isolating and degrading experience. Those attending Canadian universities often find them unresponsive to their needs. Students spoke of the low expectations of them on the part of professors,

university personnel and community members.<sup>17</sup> Students at the University of Alberta called for the formation of a World Indigenous University as a vehicle for healing. Their vision is of "a place of healing, one where people could touch each other emotionally, physically, spiritually and mentally, a place where critical thinking was the norm and sensitivity was expected".<sup>18</sup>

We agree that forming such an institution is a worthwhile goal. In Volume 3, Chapter 5, we recommend establishing an Aboriginal Peoples' International University (APIU). It would promote traditional knowledge and scholarship, undertake applied research related to Aboriginal self-government, and offer information dissemination services. We see it as an Aboriginal-controlled network of co-ordinated regional institutions and programs representing the diverse cultural and linguistic traditions of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.

APIU would articulate a unifying vision within which people of diverse traditions could pursue the study of traditional knowledge at its most complex. It would contribute to the efforts of many communities and leaders to restore elders to a place of honour as the first teachers and scholars of Aboriginal peoples. It would give Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers, professionals and scholars opportunities to meet elders and study with them. It would expand the boundaries of knowledge by developing frameworks of analysis and interpretation defined by Aboriginal values and perspectives. Aboriginal graduate students would be able to pursue options rooted in Aboriginal intellectual and spiritual traditions instead of in western traditions only. Such an institution would benefit not only Aboriginal people, but people from all over the world.

Post-secondary education is just one area of concern. Educational institutions must become more receptive to what Aboriginal students say they want from the education system: schools that recognize and acknowledge Aboriginal culture and curricula that validate the contributions of Aboriginal people. Modest curriculum improvements have been made over the past 15 years, but they have been far too slow in coming and have not been introduced systematically in all parts of the country. Changes often gloss over or avoid the fundamental changes needed to create curricula rooted in Aboriginal understandings of the world in subjects such as history, art, health, mathematics and the sciences. Aboriginal content is usually in the form of add-on units to 'enrich' existing content; it does not tackle the core assumptions, values and logic of existing curricula. Language and culture classes can be added to a school's program without altering the basic content of classes in English, French, science, math or social studies.

The Akwesasne science and mathematics program is a good example of reshaping curriculum to reflect Aboriginal values. It began as a pilot project in 1988 in the Mohawk community of Akwesasne, which straddles the borders of Ontario, Quebec and New York state. Joining together to carry out the project, which they call the Mohawk Way to Go to School, were the Aboriginal Health Professions Program of the University of Toronto, the board of education of the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, and the General Vanier Secondary School of the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry public school board (Ontario).

The goal was to find an approach that would give students a solid base in science and mathematics without supplanting traditional Aboriginal values and knowledge.

A curriculum for grades seven to nine has been developed through the efforts of Mohawk health and science professionals, elders, spiritual leaders, parents and community members. The content reflects Mohawk contributions to science and math, both historically and in the present. Science themes integrate the earth, trees, animals, birds, agriculture, food, water, cosmology, and Mohawk ways of knowing. Math themes include cultural values, sacred circles, ceremonial significance, space, time, measurement and distance concepts, puzzles, games, and environmental applications for math. One striking aspect of the program is that teaching and learning methods are being analyzed to determine what works best for Mohawk children. Traditional Mohawk teachers have their own approach to instruction, which is being studied in an effort to understand why it is so effective.

The Akwesasne science and mathematics program has several features worth noting. The curriculum has Aboriginal knowledge and beliefs at its core. These are central to the curriculum — they are not add-ons. The curriculum is holistic; rather than separating aspects of the environment into smaller component parts, the interrelatedness of entire ecosystems is examined. The curriculum includes experiential components that tie theory learned in the classroom to the real world outside the school doors. For example, students monitor environmental problems in the community. In this way, the relevance of the knowledge being acquired is explicit.

The experiential aspect of learning and the holistic approach to teaching both reflect an Aboriginal world view. The curriculum does not reject western science and mathematical concepts, but it does not hold them up as the only truth. Instead, they are seen as another way of looking at the world. In certain respects, the two approaches have complementary strengths; the underlying values and assumptions of both Mohawk and western world views are made visible.

A final aspect of this program is community involvement, which was present when the program was being developed and continues as it evolves. The community can be a resource in initiating change in the educational system, especially in the face of weak government support.

Other examples of culturally relevant approaches to education are detailed in Volume 3, Chapter 5. They include the Dene Kede curriculum and the Inuuqatigitt curriculum in the Northwest Territories, and the SIMA7, Come Join Me camp program. Cultural programs can be added to the curriculum or, in some cases, the whole curriculum can be developed around a cultural core. The most established cultural programming is happening in schools governed by Aboriginal-controlled boards, such as the Kativik School Board in Nunavik and the divisional boards in the Northwest Territories.

The Children of the Earth High School in Winnipeg, Manitoba, offers a strong cultural core as well as specific support programs that are provincially funded. The Ile-a-la-

Crosse School Board in northern Saskatchewan operates a school with classes from junior kindergarten to grade 12. Métis values, history and culture are an integral part of the curriculum, and the Michif language is taught as a credit course. The school also offers support services such as a daycare facility, a dental clinic and a public library.

At the post-secondary level, the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC) has provided excellent programs for Aboriginal youth for many years. It has succeeded where millions of dollars in mainstream education have failed. Established in 1976, SIFC is the only Aboriginally controlled university college in Canada federated with an accredited degree-granting university. The college is academically federated with the University of Regina, ensuring that all regulations respecting admissions, hiring of faculty and academic programs meet University of Regina degree standards. Its board of governors includes representatives from each tribal council in Saskatchewan, as well as representatives from the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, the Saskatchewan education department, and SIFC faculty and students.

The faculty is led by Aboriginal professors who have doctorates and master's degrees. Initially, the college focused on developing programs in Aboriginal studies, including Aboriginal art, languages, teacher education and social work. Programs for Aboriginal people in management and administration, communications, arts and health care followed in the early 1980s. More recently, in response to the needs of Aboriginal communities, SIFC has established a school of business and public administration and a department of science to encourage more students to enter science-based professions in the areas of health, engineering and agriculture. Aboriginal culture is also promoted outside the classroom. Elders conduct pipe ceremonies every morning and meet the students individually to help them learn about their heritage.

The Gabriel Dumont Institute, also in Saskatchewan, was held up as a model of a community-based institution incorporating Aboriginal values and language:

The [Gabriel Dumont Institute's] delivery model of post-secondary education to Métis people is highly regarded by the participants as an effective model for the development of Métis post-secondary education. Of essential importance to the delivery of Métis post-secondary education, as pointed out repeatedly by many participants, are three elements: community-based programming, retention of Métis languages and culture, and vocational orientation of education.<sup>19</sup>

Aboriginal youth told the Commission that these are the kinds of institutions that can meet their needs. They want more of these facilities and want them supported at a level that enables them to meet the demand for services.

Such sweeping changes may not be possible in schools that serve students from many different cultures. Nevertheless, Aboriginal youth believe every Canadian school should have a curriculum that incorporates the history and contributions of the original inhabitants of this land. Too often, the contributions of Aboriginal people are left out of

the history books or treated in a cursory or dismissive way; their science and intellectual traditions are missing completely.

Aboriginal youth want to attend schools that teach Aboriginal perspectives as part of Canadian history. They want to learn in an environment where the contributions of Aboriginal peoples are recognized and respected and where teachers recognize and respect the culture and aspirations of Aboriginal students:

The students of the Mushkegowuk Student Services think to make a better Canada that all Canadians should be educated on Native culture and history, so they'll know how we lived before the Europeans arrived and how we live today. And they would notice how quickly we changed from the time when the Europeans came....Start at an early age teaching the non-Natives about the Natives.

Gaby Bird  
Moose Factory, Ontario  
9 June 1992

### ***Resources for post-secondary education***

Education being a right for Aboriginal people has to be constitutionally protected — protected for all Aboriginal people. Through education the visions of those from the past will be unfolded. But also the visions Aboriginal leaders have today will be realized by future generations.

Walter Madonick  
Canadian Federation of Students  
The Pas, Manitoba, 20 May 1992

The curriculum and program changes described in the preceding sections are designed to keep students in the classroom. But for Aboriginal youth seeking post-secondary education, simply getting into the classroom can be a problem. This situation could escalate as more and more youth (and adults) look to post-secondary education to improve their career options and job opportunities. The next generation might be able to break through the cycles of poverty and dependency that have consigned Aboriginal peoples to the margins of society. Aboriginal youth see post-secondary education as a critical link in this chain of transformation. The lack of financial means to acquire this education is often a barrier, however.

For First Nations students, the federal government has been the most important source of financial assistance. The Northwest Territories has funded university education for all residents, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. The Yukon also provides education subsidies, but at a lower rate than the Northwest Territories.

Aboriginal youth generally decried the lack of funding available for students to attend post-secondary institutions:

The cutbacks and capping of post-secondary funding have caused problems for many students. The funding criteria restrict many students to eight-month funding support. The result of this is students have to take a heavier course load, forgoing the option to achieve a higher grade point average which is necessary in order for the students to enter into a specialized program such as medical school, law school, et cetera....

Margaret King  
President, Native Student Union, University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, 22 April 1992

[The Indian affairs department] will only fund a student once in each level, therefore limiting a student's access to another degree at the same level...I would have to find alternate sources to finance my studies. But, in fact, the government is responsible for all my education.

Claudine Louis  
Hobbema, Alberta  
10 June 1992

For Métis youth and some First Nations youth without strong ties to home communities, funding for post-secondary education is extremely limited.

There was also concern about the limits on the types of programs funded. One student noted that under the current guidelines he could not get funding for training to be a pilot:

I feel that all Aboriginal people should be given the same opportunity to choose their own careers...[I] have found it cost around \$50,000 for five years of university. It cost \$53,000 for a two-year flying program, plus you come out with 16 transferrable university credits. Over the short term, yes, flying is more expensive, but over the long term it costs about the same amount of money.

Arthur Williams  
Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Newfoundland and Labrador  
16 June 1992

Beyond funding, Aboriginal students say they need more support and resources to continue their education. Single mothers, in particular, would like to have low-cost or subsidized daycare.

We examined the issues surrounding funding for post-secondary education and the different situations of First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth in Volume 3, Chapter 5, and recommended that

- the government of Canada affirm its obligation to provide a full range of education services to treaty nations where such a right appears in treaty texts, related documents or oral accounts of treaty agreements;

- existing student benefits continue for First Nations and Inuit post-secondary education, along with additional resources to address increased costs and to meet the higher level of demand for post-secondary education; and
- that a scholarship fund be established for Métis and other Aboriginal students who do not have access to post-secondary education financial support.

For a more detailed analysis of these and other issues in education and the Commission's recommendations, see Volume 3, Chapter 5.

### **3.4 A Healthy Body**

#### *Physical fitness, sport and recreation*

Many of today's Aboriginal leaders were heavily involved in sports and recreation as youngsters. Associate Chief Judge Murray Sinclair of the Manitoba provincial court and a former member of Parliament from Alberta, Willie Littlechild, both studied physical education before becoming lawyers. Littlechild states that sports and recreation are crucial for Aboriginal youth:

The most critical area of sports for Native peoples is still the development of leadership....There is still a great need to develop sports administrators, coaches, officials and recreation directors that would serve the unique concerns of Native communities.<sup>20</sup>

Promoting Aboriginal athletes as role models can inspire young people to participate in sports and recreation programs. Mohawk athlete Alwyn Morris, gold and bronze medal winner in kayaking at the 1984 Olympics, and former Pittsburgh Penguin left-wing Ted Nolan, an Ojibwa from the Garden River Reserve in Ontario, have both taken part in the National Native Role Model Program. The program involves promotional events and speaking tours dealing with issues such as education and drug and alcohol awareness.

Aboriginal athletes build bridges to the broader Canadian community. When they compete, they join the multicultural community of sports and sports enthusiasts. Their involvement can instil pride in Aboriginal people of all nations and give Aboriginal people a national and international presence. In 1990, track-and-field fans around the world cheered as Angela Chalmers, a member of the Birdtail Sioux First Nation community in Manitoba, became the first woman in the history of the Commonwealth games to win both the 1,500- and 3,000-metre races. She went on to win a bronze medal at the 1992 summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain. Other examples abound. Indeed, the history of sports is studded with the names of Aboriginal athletes: Tom Longboat (marathon), George Armstrong and Jim Neilsen (NHL hockey), Sharon and Shirley Firth (Olympic cross-country skiers), and Jack Jacobs (NFL and CFL football), to name only a few. When Aboriginal athletes compete, they send a strong message that their people are part of the fabric of the Canadian and international communities. They are role models for youth of all nations.

Young people appearing before the Commission emphasized the need for sports and recreation opportunities. We refer to sports and recreation in the broadest sense, including physical activity, leadership training, coaching, recreation program training, participation in cultural activities, and dramatic and musical pursuits. Sports and physical pursuits are important to many Aboriginal youth because they have high energy levels and, in some circumstances, too much time on their hands. Boredom can be a major problem in communities with few resources. The Metis Nation of Alberta noted that most "Métis youth do not have access to even the most modest recreational facilities to relieve their boredom and frustration often associated with a lifestyle plagued by poverty".<sup>21</sup> Many youth spoke about this concern:

There are many problems surrounding us, one of which is that there seems to be nowhere to go or nothing to do. Inuvik's youth have talked about a facility for us to go to, one with counsellors and a program co-ordinator. In this centre we would like to see a leisure and sports complex as a joint facility — some place where we can sit and enjoy each other's company or get involved in activities.

Cheryl Greenland  
Gwich'in Youth  
Inuvik, Northwest Territories, 5 May 1992

The absence of adequate recreation facilities and leisure activities is creating a pressing situation in many Aboriginal communities, where the large number of youth, their high and early school drop-out rates and the lack of jobs are a potentially explosive combination. In the absence of leisure opportunities, substance abuse may be their only escape from crushing boredom and dreary surroundings.

As discussed earlier, substance abuse is a pervasive problem among Aboriginal youth. A study of Haida youth by the community of Old Massett, British Columbia, for example, found that substance abuse was their greatest problem. "The most common health recommendation was to have a recreation facility created especially for youth to give them an alternative to drinking and drug use."<sup>22</sup> This sentiment was echoed by youth from other communities as they spoke at our hearings:

The youth today need productive activities, a place to stay where they can work together and spend time...If they have a place to go and things to do it will be less likely for them to be involved in drug and alcohol abuse. As soon as they do something worthwhile, their self-confidence will build and they will feel better about themselves.

Kathy Nelson  
Roseau River, Manitoba  
8 December 1992

Sports and recreation can be effective instruments for youth to use in building their communities. Sport, like other activities involving goal-setting and discipline, can spill over into other aspects of a person's life. The Aboriginal view of games is a holistic one, involving culture, education, health and spiritual significance.<sup>23</sup>



Some youth "want and need to learn and incorporate a more traditional way...[and] sports are a recreation activity as well as a method of enhancing cultural retention".<sup>24</sup> These activities promote leadership development, along with cultural awareness and traditional values. Lacrosse, Inuit high-kicking and water sports such as kayaking and canoeing are all examples of sports and recreation activities rooted in traditional culture.

The Arctic Games bring athletes together to compete in mainstream and traditional sports and games. The traditional events include seal skinning, tea boiling, fish cutting, one-footed and two-footed high kicks, and head pulls. Here the emphasis is not on the elite athlete or a 'winner take all' mentality; often, competitors actually teach each other during the competition.

The First Nations Running Club is a good example of youth attempting to build a community across Canada and, at the same time, learn about their traditional culture through sport:

To the Indians, running was a way to communicate over long distances and an essential part of fighting and hunting. However, it was also a game and a way of instilling values, developing strong wills and of connecting with the forces of the universe.... Running without rest [was] a means of purification....running was far more than sport and entertainment for the Indians, it was a search for the meaning and essence of life itself.

It is the race of the individual against the limits of his own flesh and it is the unending race of all humanity with the wonder of creation. No man shall win, no man shall lose; but as each walks away, his broad chest heaving, his knees trembling, it is with the ecstatic look in his eyes of one who has spent himself to the full and before he faltered, seen over the horizon is the mystic glow of his final victory.<sup>25</sup>

Many youth are unaware of the traditional significance of running in some Aboriginal nations. One of the goals of the First Nations Running Club is to "empower native youth to lead successful lives in [a non-Aboriginal] society by developing a clear cultural foundation of values and identity". The club began in Red Lake, Ontario, in 1988. Runners have participated in a number of events, including the 1991 Sacred Run, part of the Manitoba Marathon. It was here that club members met youth from the Salish Nation, the Anishnabe and the Iroquois Confederacy. The club now has chapters in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec and Ontario and is seeking to establish chapters across the country. At the national office in the community of the Cape Croker-Chippewas of Nawash, a running camp offers youth and elders a place to come and share traditional teachings.

Northern Fly-In Sports Camps (NFISC) provide summer recreation programs for children and youth, with the goal of developing social and leadership skills.<sup>26</sup> In operation since 1986, the program was originally funded through a one-time University of Manitoba Outreach grant and various donations. The key to NFISC's success is inter-agency co-operation, with members of the wider community participating in designing and implementing the program. The RCMP, for example, is involved with NFISC and has

noted a significant drop in crime rates in communities where the program is in operation.<sup>27</sup>

However, over the long term such programs can be successful only when they are grounded in and sustained by the community. Even with ample facilities and supplies, recreation programs cannot simply be willed to work. Within the community there must be motivated and qualified leadership among youth who can organize and inspire their peers.

At the Selkirk Friendship Centre Youth Club in Manitoba, a full-time co-ordinator plans social, recreational, educational and cultural activities. The program is funded through the Community Action Program of the National Drug Strategy. Activities focus on drug abuse prevention and, notably, the program accepts not only abstainers but strivers as well (individuals who use drugs occasionally but are trying to break free).

The Rediscovery Camp model (mentioned earlier in relation to spiritual health) can also be used to foster self-esteem and cultural identity while contributing to physical development. The camps enhance outdoor skills, traditional land-based skills, and cultural and environmental awareness, and the daily regimen contributes to physical fitness and well-being. The activities vary depending on the surrounding environment. In Fort McMurray in northern Alberta, students canoe, hunt small game, fish, hike and learn to set up camp. In coastal British Columbia, young people can develop backpacking skills and ocean-related skills such as fishing and swimming. A spin-off benefit is the employment Rediscovery Camps have created in Aboriginal communities, as participants go on to become guides, leaders and trainers.

The Canadian Outward Bound School has worked with Aboriginal schools in running youth programs. Community members in Big Trout Lake, Ontario, have created their own land-based program. Elders there take out on their traditional land about 40 young people for several weeks at a time during each of the four seasons. The Avataq Cultural Institute in Nunavik operates a traditional Inuit summer camp in Inukjuak each year, and a similar camp is operated by the community of Kuujjuak. On the northern coast of Labrador, high school athletes gather twice each year (in fall and winter) for a week of sports competition. The events include traditional Inuit games. The games are rotated among participating communities, giving students an opportunity to travel and meet their peers in other areas. Similarly, Aboriginal games have been held in Quebec each year since 1991. Many youth enjoy the healthy competition and see these events as something to look forward to in the school year.

Sports and recreation contribute to healing in a holistic way. Participation enhances physical development and increases awareness of fitness and nutrition. But when youth also operate the programs, a momentum seems to build, tapping into their energy and creativity. They develop leadership skills, as well as communication, fund-raising and organizing skills they can apply to their personal and community endeavours in other areas besides recreation.

In Old Massett Village, Haida youth practise traditional dancing at the Davidson Longhouse several times a week. In addition, 40 youth paddled in ocean-going canoes to Bella Bella, a Heiltsuk community on British Columbia's central coast, for the revival of the great west coast tradition of inter-nation canoe gatherings. From start to finish, youth carried the day. They were responsible for making and painting their own paddles and learning songs and dances to perform for the host village.

Youth also participate in the All Native Basketball Tournament in Prince Rupert and the Christmas Classics Tournament, hosted by Old Massett. Students there are asking for more organized sporting events for men and women and cultural classes to teach traditional skills such as carving, weaving, Haida dancing and food preparation. They also want "workshops for the youth regarding issues such as self-esteem, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, peer pressure, career and education, and communication skills".<sup>28</sup>

The Old Massett programs succeeded because basic facilities were available to house the programs; the holistic approach guided program development and allowed people with different skills and abilities to participate; and youth were able to exercise leadership and initiative.

A similar example is the Chevak Village Youth Association in Alaska, where "the local community has taken over the organization and adapted its goals and activities to the local norms". Like the best of holistic programs, it serves a number of educational, social and economic functions for youth. It was created and run entirely by Aboriginal youth to address a situation where "hanging out, visiting, playing basketball and snow machining pretty well exhausted the leisure activities available to the youth of Chevak".<sup>29</sup>

All these activities and organizations are proof that youth can be the solution, if they are not simply regarded as 'the problem'. When governments and communities make the leap of faith to assist youth, youth respond. Solutions do exist, and communities can implement them — sometimes despite government inaction. Yet attempts to take action often meet a host of obstacles. Some initiatives that have shown real results have been dismantled because of shifting government priorities, or programs have broken down because of inadequate financial resources.

In communities where there are recreational facilities, the need for leadership is acute. The Arctic College offers a two-year program to train recreation leaders, with a curriculum that includes communications, management, programming, leadership, facilities management, marketing, anatomy, physiology and social psychology. The Northern Recreation Director Training Program (NRDTP) is a combined program of the Manitoba departments of education and training (New Careers North), culture, heritage and citizenship, and northern affairs. It provides training for adults who may have had difficulties with the educational system in the past.<sup>30</sup> Young Aboriginal people want to see programs such as NRDTP and the Arctic College Recreation Leaders Program supported and expanded so they are accessible to everyone interested in this field.

Given the success of these initiatives, it is regrettable that similar efforts are not being made across Canada. Neil Winther, who was among the founders of Northern Fly-In Sports Camps, states, "The farther one moves up the bureaucratic ladder (provincial or federal) the less evidence one finds for support". Attempts to develop a Manitoba Aboriginal sports and recreation association have been slowed because "this organization could be seen as a threat to the existing provincial sport organizations, which have done little to target Aboriginal people, even though it is obvious that Aboriginal people have the greatest need for sport".<sup>31</sup> Given the number of Aboriginal youth and the factors that make them vulnerable to physical and social dysfunction, sustained efforts are needed to make sports and recreational facilities and leadership programs widely accessible. The first step would be to establish a body to advise federal, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments on how best to meet sports and recreation needs in Aboriginal communities. This advisory council should have a membership drawn from among Aboriginal sports and recreation professionals, administrators, and co-ordinators across the country. Non-Aboriginal professionals with expertise in this area could also participate. Each province and territory must be represented. With the help of provincial, territorial and federal funding, council members could co-ordinate needs assessments and consult Aboriginal communities to determine their sports and recreation priorities.

The advisory council would then direct resources so that communities can develop, implement and sustain their own programs. This would include acquiring equipment and facilities and building capacity within the community — in particular, leadership and recreation training. The council should not dictate or impose programs developed centrally. The record shows that most successful initiatives are community-driven.

For example, the advisory council could develop a program to provide the expertise of trained recreation programmers to travel to communities and give presentations or workshops on subjects such as how to set up and run a recreation sports league. This way, skills and knowledge would stay with the community after the experts had left. Aboriginal athletes — many of whom are role models for Aboriginal youth — could be recruited for this purpose. Programming must be implemented and sustained by the community, however.

A floor hockey league is a good example of a program that can be set up, even in a community with limited resources; equipment needs are minimal, many youth are familiar with the general rules of the game, and if there is no recreation facility, any building with an open floor can be used. Many other sports can be adapted to suit the resources the community has available.

Such programs can begin now to meet the sports and recreation needs of Aboriginal youth; there need not be a long wait while funding is secured or recreation complexes are built. Meanwhile, planning should be under way to develop resources and expertise for the long term.

## **Recommendations**

The Commission recommends that

#### **4.4.3**

The federal government, through the Minister of State for Fitness and Amateur Sport, establish and fund an Aboriginal sports and recreation advisory council to advise — in consultation with regional, provincial and territorial sports and recreation organizations — federal, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments on how best to meet the sports and recreation needs of Aboriginal people (including those living in urban areas).

#### **4.4.4**

The proposed Aboriginal sports and recreation advisory council promote programs and initiatives that are

- (a) community-driven, based on needs identified by the community, with programming developed or modified by the community to meet the community's needs;
- (b) sustainable, as opposed to one-time tournaments or events; and
- (c) capacity builders aimed at providing instruction in recreation programming, leadership development and coaching skills.

The federal government would fund the council. Provinces now provide the bulk of funding for sports and recreation initiatives in their areas, so they would be expected to help cover the cost of initiatives taking place within their boundaries.

Aboriginal people will have to work with the federal, provincial and territorial governments to decide the form, structure and membership of the advisory council. Aboriginal experts in the field — sports and recreation programmers, co-ordinators, administrators, researchers, and Aboriginal youth representatives — at the community, provincial and national levels should meet with ministers of sports and recreation to address organizational concerns. An intergovernmental meeting of these ministers would provide a forum for discussion among all the parties involved.

### **Recommendation**

The Commission recommends that

#### **4.4.5**

A meeting of ministers responsible for sports and recreation be convened within one year of the publication of this report to discuss the form and structure of the proposed Aboriginal sports and recreation advisory council, and that Aboriginal youth and Aboriginal experts in the field — recreation and sports programmers, co-ordinators, administrators and researchers — be invited to take part in this discussion.

A co-ordinated and concerted effort to provide constructive outlets for the energy and enthusiasm of Aboriginal youth, and at the same time develop their leadership skills and self-esteem, can go a long way toward improving the health of Aboriginal communities.

### ***Aboriginal youth and hiv/aids awareness***

Another serious health concern of Aboriginal youth is Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Research conducted for the Commission suggests that "Aboriginal youth are at a high risk of acquiring HIV infection because they are sexually active and often engage in unprotected sex, as evidenced by the high number of teenage pregnancies; they are under strain of peer pressure to use and abuse alcohol and a variety of substances; some have been sexually abused; some are homeless, transient and street dwellers".<sup>32</sup> This statement is supported by the 1990 study on AIDS and the Aboriginal population. Researchers found that Aboriginal communities are particularly susceptible to transmission through heterosexual contact and that the youth population is highly vulnerable.

Recent data indicate that in terms of confirmed (and surviving) cases of HIV infection, 69 of the 2,597 Canadians diagnosed as of January 1993 were Aboriginal, based on self-definition and physicians' records.<sup>33</sup> While this number is relatively small, it represents three times the number of diagnosed cases since the first report of the Joint National Committee on Aboriginal AIDS Education and Prevention in 1990.

Despite this, little has been done to date to address the issue. The root problems — abuse, homelessness and drug use — and possible solutions are discussed elsewhere in this report. We focus here on the need for educating Aboriginal youth about AIDS and all sexually transmitted diseases.

Aboriginal youth want to see more AIDS awareness strategies and programs designed specifically for them. These strategies must include education on reducing the risk of contracting HIV. Similar initiatives should be launched for awareness and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Youth themselves can be tapped as a resource in developing and implementing programs. A discussion of HIV/AIDS and the Aboriginal population in general can be found in Volume 3, Chapter 3.

## **3.5 Emotional Health**

In a healthy community environment, youth in distress would be able to turn to an accessible and co-ordinated support network. They would be able to talk with parents, elders and peers about their concerns and problems. They would be able to contribute to sharing circles and take part in traditional ceremonies. But for many Aboriginal youth, elders are difficult to reach because they are so few, language is often a barrier to communication, parents are still weighed down with their own burdens, and the friends a young person needs are wrestling with their own problems.

The most urgent need for youth in distress is to speak with someone they can trust, someone who can readily understand and empathize with them. Youth crisis centres, friendship centres — indeed, any facility used by Aboriginal youth — should have a 'youthful face'. Wherever possible, young Aboriginal people should be recruited to work as counsellors in these facilities and to staff information and crisis lines.

Youth recognize, too, that elders have much to offer, and they want them to be an integral part of their lives. Yet there are few ways to involve elders in the lives of urban Aboriginal youth. This is an immediate concern because the number of elders with comprehensive knowledge of the language and traditions is declining quickly. They are a small proportion of the Aboriginal population; if their knowledge is not passed on, it will disappear with them:

There should be a sense of — not independence or dependence — but interdependency, because traditionally elders provided a lot of the basic necessities so that young people can have their needs met. And that has to continue, but sometimes that is lost in some families....There should be contributions from elders and parents...but not controlled by those people.

Delbert Majer  
Saskatchewan Metis Addictions Council  
Regina, Saskatchewan  
10 May 1993

Elders must be involved in the holistic healing of youth. They have much to offer the spirit, the mind, the body and the emotions. They have an important role in teaching traditional culture and values. Aboriginal youth want to see the elders and their knowledge integrated into all aspects of community life, including education, health, justice and governance. They feel the elders' teachings should help inform the guiding principles of community life. In Chapter 3 of this volume we discuss a number of ways to bring elders and youth together.

## **4. Making a Difference: Empowering Aboriginal Youth**

### **4.1 Empowerment**

We could go on forever talking about solutions, but if we are just going to talk and we are not going to do anything, then these solutions mean nothing.

Tonya Makletzoff  
Yellowknife, Northwest Territories  
10 December 1992

Healthy Aboriginal youth are ready to face the challenges that confront their communities and to find the solutions that will make their nations strong. Youth told the Commission emphatically that they need to be recognized by and involved in the institutions that affect their lives. They want to empower themselves by acquiring the skills and capacities that will enable them to solve their own problems. Many of the healing initiatives

described in this report will help them gain the necessary spiritual, mental, physical and emotional qualities. Having discovered their inner resources, they will develop the lasting solutions needed by their communities. This is why Aboriginal youth are demanding that their voices be heard.

Aboriginal youth say they need to be empowered individually, politically and economically. Individual empowerment means that young people must be healthy as individuals, able to help themselves and others. Political empowerment would enable them to speak out, take a stand on the issues that they care about, and work together at the local, national and international levels. Economic empowerment would ensure that they acquire the skills needed to contribute as valuable members of their communities and nations.

Youth are willing to roll up their sleeves and work hard to rebuild. But they want to do more than that. They want to help develop the initiatives, the ideas, and the organizations necessary to sustain successful programs. They want a say in planning and implementing community development, in laying the groundwork for the future.

## **4.2 Recognition and Involvement**

If each young person is seen as a star in the cosmos, then empowerment is the process through which those stars become a constellation. Many connections must be made to restore Aboriginal communities. Youth need to be involved in governance and local administration of communities, and they need ways to express themselves collectively, to communicate with each other across vast distances, to talk to their peers in communities accessible only by air or winter road. They look beyond borders and realize that some of the problems plaguing their communities are not unique to Canada — they are present wherever Indigenous peoples have been colonized.

Young Aboriginal people must have the means to develop deep roots in their communities. Concurrently, they must be allowed to branch out and assume a place in society at large. Some will find a role in home communities; others will leave but still retain roots at home. Nearly 45 per cent of Aboriginal youth live in cities, but a significant proportion have spent at least some of their growing years in small communities. Many have a personal commitment to making their communities of origin better places in which to grow up and live.

Various organizations have worked with Aboriginal youth in co-operative efforts aimed at empowerment. The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) is an example. Youth have participated in its annual general meetings since 1984 and have representatives on national and provincial boards of directors.<sup>34</sup> Youth forums have been held at all NAFC annual meetings since 1989. NAFC has planned, organized and hosted numerous activities designed to benefit youth and children — culturally based programs such as drumming and dance groups, pow-wows, the Little Beavers program, language classes, and gatherings for youth and elders.



At the behest of young people, NAFC established the Aboriginal Youth Council in September 1994. It is composed of an executive council and four representatives from the northern, western, central and eastern regions of Canada (with plans to expand the council to include representation from each province and territory). All the executive and regional representatives are Aboriginal youth. The purpose of the council is to strengthen the voice of Aboriginal youth within NAFC and in the country at large and to direct NAFC initiatives geared to Aboriginal youth.

The main goals of the Aboriginal Youth Council are

- communication among Aboriginal youth of all nations;
- training and development for Aboriginal youth;
- involvement of Aboriginal youth at all levels of the friendship centre movement; and
- preservation, promotion and protection of Aboriginal cultures and heritage.

Of particular importance to the council is establishing a national database of individuals, groups and government bodies dealing with Aboriginal youth and youth issues. Sharon Visitor, NAFC's youth intervener co-ordinator, says the database is a necessary first step to mobilizing Aboriginal youth. She notes that because of government funding cuts, some centres cannot afford to send youth to the annual general meetings. "We want to motivate the youth to get them out and find their own resources, and to organize their own events", such as youth forums and workshops.<sup>35</sup> The database will help to put youth in contact with others who have those resources and skills. As well, it will be a national networking resource.

Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC) has worked with its young constituents. A national Inuit youth conference in northern Quebec in November 1994 drew 80 delegates from across the north. The delegates formed the National Inuit Youth Council, and its president now has a seat on the national board of Inuit Tapirisat. ITC was quick to accept a youth representative on its board and favours more youth involvement in the organization.<sup>36</sup>

The drive among youth to share and communicate with one another is a motivating factor behind a relatively new international youth organization, the Inuit Circumpolar Youth Council. The council has its origins in a resolution brought forward at the 1992 general assembly of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) calling for greater youth involvement. The executive council felt that if ICC was to follow through on this resolution in the spirit in which it was brought forth, then it must let youth take the initiative.

The Inuit Circumpolar Youth Council was officially formed in the fall of 1994. It includes representatives from Canada, Greenland, Alaska and Russia. Its focus is to consider issues before ICC from the perspective of youth. Generally, the council is pushing for greater youth involvement in ICC and wants to direct attention to the special

concerns of Aboriginal youth. Because of its international nature, it is particularly interested in enhancing communication among Aboriginal youth in different countries.<sup>37</sup>

For many Aboriginal youth, the key to a better future is communication and networking. By sharing their concerns, youth can compare notes and arrive at possible solutions to problems. In some cases, the solutions are already out there; it is simply a matter of getting the information. Communication also fosters a sense of solidarity, of a shared mission and commitment among Aboriginal youth:

At this present time, myself and many other Aboriginal youth feel that we can unite all Aboriginal youth from across the island and Labrador to form one unique group with different backgrounds, cultures, customs....The Aboriginal people have to work together....

Yance Sheehan  
St. John's, Newfoundland  
22 May 1992

The Internet is one way for Aboriginal youth in Canada and around the globe to communicate with each other. As more schools, libraries and other institutions acquire this resource, Aboriginal youth must be trained and encouraged to use it. Youth in remote and rural areas in particular will benefit from the information superhighway, but it will enable all youth to share their concerns and aspirations and to learn more quickly about how others have achieved success in building their communities.

Access to national and international databases could provide youth with information that will help them take charge of their own problems and develop solutions for their own communities. Such databases contain demographic and other statistical information, contacts for funding and service agencies, and information about employment opportunities, technical and human resources, educational opportunities, and cultural and recreational activities. As more government departments, individuals, and private and public organizations go online, these databases will expand to make more and more information available to Aboriginal youth.

In Volume 3, Chapter 5 of this report, we recommend establishing an electronic clearinghouse for information exchange between Aboriginal people worldwide. This network would link rural and urban communities around the world. Information could be made available from electronic archives, Aboriginal resource centres, libraries, and government and non-government organizations. Users would be able to locate relevant resources and contact communities or individuals directly. Aboriginal communities could ensure access by installing public computer terminals in a school, adult education building, library or other public facility.

Aboriginal youth and their concerns should also be represented more often in the mass media. CBC radio in particular offers a network that is widely accessible to Aboriginal communities in all parts of the country. Private broadcasters should also be encouraged to increase their commitment to programming for Aboriginal youth. In both cases,

commitments to Aboriginal programming should not be met by burying these programs in late-night or early-morning spots.

We examine this situation in some detail in Volume 3, Chapter 6, where we recommend that public and private media give greater access to Aboriginal media products. The CBC in particular should have a mandate to purchase and broadcast Aboriginal programming from independent Aboriginal producers and to create English- and French-language versions of Aboriginal programs for regional and national distribution. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) also has a role to play. Licences issued by the CRTC to public and commercial broadcasters for regions with significant Aboriginal populations should include conditions guaranteeing fair access to and distribution of Aboriginal and Aboriginal-language programs.

Finally, getting more Aboriginal people involved in the media will help increase and improve programming about them and their concerns. We recommend that public communications and cultural agency policies, as well as employment equity plans in both private and public media, address the need for training and better representation of Aboriginal people. (Specific recommendations and supporting details are in Volume 3, Chapter 6 of this report.)

Canada has been active internationally in human rights development and Aboriginal issues. In 1985 it sponsored a series of activities for International Youth Year to help young people across Canada know themselves better and become aware of their potential contributions to society. Aboriginal youth participated in these events, and their organizations continue to play a key role in the international Aboriginal youth movement.

Healing Our Spirit Worldwide was a conference held in Edmonton in 1992. The Saskatoon Youth Advisory Council played an important role in developing and organizing the event. The Cree Nation Youth Council of Quebec helped organize the 1992-1993 World Indigenous Youth Conference, held in Quebec City. The goal was to bring together more than 2,000 Indigenous youth, along with their elders, to examine social and economic problems and to discuss solutions. Other goals included establishing permanent networks, developing more peaceful relationships with non-Indigenous people, increasing youth involvement, and drafting a universal declaration of Indigenous rights. In June 1993 the International Youth Assembly was held in the Little Black River First Nation community and in Winnipeg, Manitoba. More than 150 youth from five countries attended the assembly. The three main topics of discussion were healing, education and empowerment. These activities demonstrate the ability of youth to organize themselves nationally and internationally, to address areas of concern, and to take responsibility for their own healing.

### **4.3 Economic Empowerment**

Many Aboriginal youth see themselves facing an economic wasteland. They see high unemployment rates, inadequate training and a lack of meaningful jobs. Their unemployment rate is 31.8 per cent, more than double that of non-Aboriginal youth (15.1

per cent).<sup>38</sup> Added to this is pressure to choose between the traditional way of life and the modern world, the implication being that there is no way to accommodate the two worlds. Many youth are beginning to reject this argument. They want employment, but they seek employment that contributes to the community, not just to the gross national product. The economic empowerment of Aboriginal youth involves building a bridge between the wage and non-wage economies.

An example of this type of bridging is where young people earn sweat equity by volunteering in the construction of houses for the community. Federal programs with a sweat equity component do exist; there should be more of them in Aboriginal communities. Programs should be flexible to accommodate the needs of various communities. Sweat equity programs would achieve much-needed improvements in community infrastructure and could also have the added benefit of facilitating healing for individuals and the community at large. Many Aboriginal communities face severe housing shortages. Aboriginal youth are often looking for meaningful work, but the community offers little opportunity for employment. Sweat equity housing programs could thus meet the needs of youth and of communities.

Under these programs, people 'invest' by contributing their labour to the construction of other community members' houses. The sweat equity they build can later be exchanged for help in building their own houses. A model for such programs is Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit non-governmental organization founded in 1976. Habitat for Humanity Canada, established in 1985, describes its activities as follows:

Through volunteer labor, efficient management and tax-deductible donations of money and materials, Habitat builds and rehabilitates homes with the help of the home-owner (partner) families. Costs differ relative to location, labor and materials. Currently, a three-bedroom Habitat house in Canada costs between \$50,000 and \$80,000. Habitat is a joint venture in which those benefitting from it participate directly in the work. Each homeowner family must invest 500 hours of unpaid labor or "sweat equity" in the construction of their and others' homes. This reduces cost, increases pride and fosters positive relationships.<sup>39</sup>

This approach could be adapted and modified specifically for Aboriginal people and communities. In addition to earning sweat equity toward a house, youth would learn and refine marketable skills. The community's housing needs would be met, more and better houses could be built for the same amount of money, and employment opportunities would be created in the community. Finally, and perhaps most important, community bonds are strengthened through such co-operative efforts; as people build homes, they are building a community.

This type of program could be accommodated by modifying current funding programs for housing construction in Aboriginal communities. A more detailed discussion of housing issues is presented in Volume 3, Chapter 4. In the same volume, Chapter 3, we discuss other initiatives that help build and strengthen bonds within the community.

## **Recommendation**

The Commission recommends that

### **4.4.6**

Co-operative home construction, based on the Habitat for Humanity model, be initiated in Aboriginal communities to provide housing, employment and construction skills for Aboriginal youth.

A trained and qualified Aboriginal work force benefits not only the Aboriginal community but also the wider economic community. Aboriginal youth are the fastest growing population segment in Canada. Increasing numbers are reaching work force age, yet they are not being equipped with the skills needed to participate in the labour market.

The Aboriginal population is an important source of new employees. In Manitoba, for example, it is projected that Aboriginal youth will account for about 16 per cent of all young people reaching work force age (15 to 19) between 2001 and 2016. In Saskatchewan, their proportion will grow from 15.3 per cent in 2001 to 19.3 per cent in 2016.<sup>40</sup> An investment in training for Aboriginal youth will benefit individuals but will also be essential to achieve the necessary level of competence in the work force as a whole.

For Aboriginal nations, education and training are especially important in implementing self-government. A trained work force will be needed to plan and deliver services previously provided by governments. Education and training to develop management and administrative skills will be crucial to a smooth transition. These skills will be necessary to organize and manage local government services and to facilitate the building of infrastructure to support community development.

Equipped with these skills, Aboriginal youth will be able to participate in the labour force anywhere, whether they choose to use their skills in their communities of origin or to travel to other areas of the country. To ensure adaptability in the labour market, they must be equipped with certifiable skills that are broadly based and portable.

The Commission examined these issues and set out a plan for Aboriginal employment development in Volume 2, Chapter 5. Topics discussed there include a special employment and training initiative aimed at major employers who can provide the kinds of jobs and work experience critical to developing the self-governing capacity of Aboriginal nations; employment equity initiatives for a much broader range of employers; employment services; employment opportunities in Aboriginal communities; the reduction of obstacles to employment, such as lack of child care; and job creation in Aboriginal communities.

Economic empowerment means Aboriginal youth will have a say in developing and running employment and other economic programs targeted to them. In some areas,

youth can be directly involved: youth counsellors, recreational leaders, teaching assistants and health providers should all be recruited from the ranks of youth. In urban centres, youth should be sought out for employment as street workers and to staff friendship centres. They should also work in transition houses that help youth from small or isolated communities adjust to life in the city. All these initiatives require qualified and experienced leadership. But they also require the enthusiasm, energy and empathy that youth demonstrate in abundance.

## **5. Consolidation: A Framework for a Canada-Wide Aboriginal Youth Policy**

### **5.1 The Need for a Canada-Wide Policy**

The lack of a coherent policy on Aboriginal youth, as well as the absence of clear goals and priorities, has left some youth frustrated and disillusioned in their dealings with government. Money and resources have been devoted to a variety of programs over the past quarter-century without any clear policy direction. Programming is fragmented, scattered and reactive. There is no framework and few clear driving principles. Generally, Aboriginal youth programs have been driven by other initiatives (such as those developed under the Young Offenders Act or job-creation programs) or occur in response to very specific situations (such as training Aboriginal health care workers to deal with AIDS or family violence). There is no encompassing framework to guide programming specifically for youth. Youth do not expect special treatment, but their pivotal role in their communities suggests a need for programs that recognize their specific needs, aspirations and concerns.

In addition, Aboriginal youth face crisis situations that must be addressed immediately. Federal programs have tended to focus on employment, training and education. While these are important, usually initiatives concerning them have been developed in the context of wider programs aimed at all youth. Unless the special needs of young Aboriginal people are considered, programs that are inappropriate for their specific circumstances or culture may be initiated, resulting in money being spent but problems remaining unsolved.

The provinces have been dealing with the issues confronting Aboriginal youth for years now through corrections, social services and education systems. Provincial Aboriginal programming appears somewhat more focused than federal programming. In particular, some of the western provinces have made efforts to complement programs in the correctional field with social programming for families and youth. Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories appear to have had the greatest success to date in placing youth programs in a larger policy context.

For their part, Aboriginal organizations have been working to integrate youth in their decision making and to reaffirm their commitment to youth.

At its 1989 and 1992 general assemblies, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference passed a number of resolutions concerning Inuit youth, calling for their recognition within the organization. The conference has a section on Inuit youth in its Principles and Elements for a Comprehensive Arctic Policy. It contains 20 clauses that could guide government efforts to develop a similarly comprehensive approach. The following selection of principles shows the potential scope of such a document:

The strategy should encompass direct youth participation and action at regional, national and international levels, as appropriate. In addition, youth programs should be designed so that a significant portion of the responsibility is placed on Inuit youth.

Considering that youth (24 years or less) make up over 50 percent of the population in circumpolar regions, it is necessary that they actively participate in political and other decision-making processes....

Moreover, contributions of young people to society should be recognized and highlighted. Through collective efforts and improved communication, both among youth, and between youth and other members of the Inuit community, major steps must be taken to overcome the barriers to youth participation. The Arctic policy must consider ways for new and existing northern institutions to better respond to the needs and aspirations of young people and provide for their involvement. Mechanisms must also be established to monitor and assess government policies and programs in terms of their impact on younger generations. Where necessary, new initiatives and opportunities to enhance youth development and address youth priorities must be introduced.<sup>41</sup>

The Cree Nation Youth Council of Quebec was established in 1990 as a consultative organization to the Cree Regional Authority/Grand Council of the Crees (Quebec). Its mandate comes from an assembly of Cree youth, a regional body composed of representatives from nine Cree communities.<sup>42</sup> Aboriginal communities are starting to focus their energies on youth; Canadian governments can join them as partners.

If Aboriginal youth are to become leaders in their communities, they have to learn about leadership, about themselves and about each other. Meetings, exchanges and leadership development are vitally important to this generation. Yet these kinds of initiatives have been virtually absent from federal programs. A model for such programs is a youth service project launched under the U.S. National Community Service Act. It is called Gadugi (a Cherokee concept embracing service within a family, clan or community based on a common bond of tribal identity). Gadugi was developed as a national Indian youth leadership project. Particularly instructive are the principles that guide the program; they are derived from key values common to Aboriginal peoples in North America:

- Family: Special attention and concerted effort are needed to restore the strength of the family within Native American culture.

- **Service to Others:** Cultivating the spirit of service provides young people with an opportunity to transcend self-centredness, to develop genuine concern for others, and to put into action positive attitudes and skills.
- **Spiritual Awareness:** A return to spiritual values, be they Christian or traditional, will provide young people with a constant source of inner strength, self-knowledge, perspective and love for others.
- **Challenge:** There is value in involving youth in risk-taking activities, where they are called upon to tap into and stretch their own capabilities.
- **Meaningful Roles:** These are essential in order to develop positive social skills and a sense of self-worth.
- **Recognition:** The turning points of youth are often referred to as "rites of passage" and need to be acknowledged and celebrated.
- **Responsibility:** A strong sense of personal responsibility is a vital element in the development of capable young people.
- **Natural and Logical Consequences:** Nature is often the best teacher, and young people must not be over-protected from reality.
- **Respect:** Respect fosters a sense of relationship and unity with the universe.
- **Dialogue:** Talking about what happened, analyzing why it is important, and determining how we can learn from the experience helps young people internalize their experience and use what they learn in other situations.<sup>43</sup>

Aboriginal youth programs should be aimed at all Aboriginal youth, no matter where they live or to which nation they belong. In the past, distinctions have denied groups such as Métis youth access to services and support. Equally important, distinctions based on artificial categories such as 'Indian' status obscure more important differences that exist at the community level. Not all status Indian communities face the same problems, and the circumstances of Inuit youth can in some cases be quite similar to those facing Métis youth. The important differences are local, and programs should be developed that are flexible enough to respond to local conditions.

Young Aboriginal people want to strengthen communities by empowering themselves and others. It is they who will start the journey toward self-determination and community development. Healthy local communities are better able to reach out to the larger community around them. Building a new relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada depends on young people and on their vision and commitment to a new path, to a wider, more inclusive circle.

## **5.2 The Policy Framework**



Aboriginal youth have tremendous energy and potential. The role of public policy should be to help build spirit and leadership so that they can confidently assume their place as the living future of Aboriginal societies. There is an urgent need for a co-ordinated, comprehensive policy framework to guide existing programs in a concentrated effort to deal with problems and develop opportunities.

### **Recommendation**

The Commission recommends that

#### **4.4.7**

Federal, provincial and territorial governments develop and adopt, through the leadership of the Ministry of State for Youth, and in close consultation with Aboriginal youth and their representative organizations, a comprehensive Canada-wide policy framework to guide initiatives and programs directed to Aboriginal youth.

Based on careful consideration of what Aboriginal youth told the Commission, we propose the following guide to establishing the framework for a Canada-wide Aboriginal youth policy, in the form of key program areas, goals, and a process for developing and implementing a holistic policy.

#### ***Key program areas***

To focus the policy, we identified key program areas based on what we heard from Aboriginal youth and on our own examination of the issues.

### **Recommendation**

The Commission recommends that

#### **4.4.8**

Key program areas for a Canada-wide Aboriginal youth policy be education, justice, health and healing, sports and recreation, and support programs for urban Aboriginal youth:

- (a) Education in the broadest sense must be a priority, with greater efforts to develop a culturally appropriate curriculum that reinforces the value of Aboriginal culture. Transformative education — which uses students' personal experiences as a springboard for deeper analysis and understanding of the world around them — should be considered in developing initiatives in education.
- (b) The justice and corrections system has a substantial impact on youth. New programs should be developed and existing programs modified to focus on reintegrating youth into the community through approaches that reflect Aboriginal culture.

(c) Health and healing must reflect the needs of Aboriginal youth, particularly in the areas of counselling and support.

(d) Sports and recreation must be treated as an integral part of Aboriginal youth policy. Increased resources for facilities and programming are needed, as are trained people to co-ordinate sports and recreation programs for Aboriginal youth. Also, the sports community — athletes and fans — must be seen as a way to build and strengthen relationships among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

(e) Aboriginal youth in urban areas need innovative programs to help them bridge the traditional and urban worlds and support their choices about where and how to live.

Canadian governments should consult and collaborate with Aboriginal governments and organizations and Aboriginal youth and their organizations, in designing and delivering programs.

### ***Goals***

Overarching goals are needed to guide development of the policy. Aboriginal youth, working with the other parties involved, will have to set specific goals for what they hope to achieve through the policy. The following should be used to guide and develop initiatives in all program areas:

- Youth must participate actively in political and decision-making processes at all levels. They must be seen as, and be encouraged to be, valuable members of society, not simply a group requiring attention and assistance. Moreover, young people's contributions to society must be recognized and highlighted.
- A key goal of all Aboriginal youth programs should be to provide the tools and resources youth need to develop their leadership potential, enhance their awareness of culture and traditions, gain self-esteem and confidence, and learn the value of working together.
- A central concern of Aboriginal peoples is that cultural and spiritual rebirth proceed alongside economic development. Aboriginal youth do not see economic development as an end in itself. They see it as a means for Aboriginal people to support their communities and express daily in a thousand small acts who they are and what they aspire to be.
- Youth must be trained for involvement in nation building. The relationship between economic development and cultural rebirth is seen most clearly in the move to self-government and building the institutions of self-government. Such institutions will be self-sustaining and will be rooted in the values of traditional culture. Training and employment needs must include skills and abilities that will help Aboriginal people become self-governing.

- While employment and training programs are important, governments should pay equal attention to the cultural and spiritual development of youth by supporting initiatives in those areas. To facilitate cross-cultural dialogue among youth across regional, national and international lines, youth exchange programs, conferences, seminars and workshops should receive sponsorship.

### **Recommendation**

The Commission recommends that

#### **4.4.9**

All governments pursue the following goals in developing and implementing a Canada-wide Aboriginal youth policy: youth participation at all levels, leadership development, economic development and cultural rebirth, youth involvement in nation building, and cultural and spiritual development.

#### ***Process***

To monitor progress toward these goals and to set new goals where warranted, there should be a regular assembly where participants can assess progress to date. In some cases, new approaches or strategies for meeting goals may be developed if participants feel there is a need. Also, as programs and initiatives evolve, and as new priorities arise, new policies and programs can be put forward.

Youth delegates would be selected from various regional, provincial, territorial and national organizations; representatives from federal, provincial and territorial departments dealing with concerns of Aboriginal youth, and selected representatives from the public and private spheres should also be invited to attend. An Aboriginal youth conference organizing committee, in consultation with its constituents, would choose these representatives.

### **Recommendation**

The Commission recommends that

#### **4.4.10**

The federal government provide funding for a biennial conference of Aboriginal youth delegates and invited representatives from government and non-government organizations, the purpose of which would be to

- (a) review progress over the preceding 24 months on goals established under the Canada-wide Aboriginal youth policy; and
- (b) set priorities for new policies and programs where a need is identified by delegates.

The first such conference should be held within two years of the release of this report and would be the organizing conference at which Aboriginal youth delegates can develop this initiative. Issues of importance and urgency will be identified, and organizational issues and activities can be planned in preparation for the first biennial Aboriginal youth conference. The initial co-ordination among representative organizations can be handled by an appropriate branch of the federal government, such as Youth Services Canada (Human Resources). The organization and structure of the conference should be established by a representative Aboriginal youth organization chosen by the parties involved. We suggest that the organization of subsequent biennial conferences be rotated among Aboriginal youth organizations.

## **6. Conclusion**

I believe now is our time. Now is our time. We are starting to be looked at now and I believe we can really make a difference now because we are finally standing up.

Randy Nepoose  
Hobbema, Alberta  
10 June 1992

If the quest of Aboriginal youth could be summed up in one word, that word would be 'empowerment'. In this chapter we have documented some of the serious obstacles to empowerment, but also the many efforts of Aboriginal youth and institutions to take charge of their future. Youth want to take hold of their future, not be dragged unwillingly to an unknown destination. They want to be able to shape the world they will inherit; they want a say in what kind of world that will be.

In the words of the National Aboriginal Youth Career and Awareness Committee, as steps are taken to heal communities, "self-government and self-determination will fall naturally into place. Each issue has a time and place that will allow it to nurture and flourish".<sup>44</sup>

The development of healthy, vibrant Aboriginal communities in Canada can serve as a model to the world. Aboriginal youth look at the problems and ask, why? Then they take the next important step, which is to articulate solutions grounded in their cultures and traditions, solutions that reflect who they are and what they have to contribute to Canada and the world. Looking at those solutions, the question then becomes, why not?

Aboriginal youth want to be the solution, not the problem. Healing youth today will lead to their empowerment tomorrow. With empowerment, they will have the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual energy to help those around them: their peers, their parents, and their communities. The circle of wellness will grow.

## **Notes:**

\* Transcripts of the Commission's hearings are cited with the speaker's name and affiliation, if any, and the location and date of the hearing. See A Note About Sources at the beginning of this volume for information about transcripts and other Commission publications.

**1** Mary Jane Norris, Don Kerr and François Nault, "Projections of the Population with Aboriginal Identity in Canada, 1991-2016", research study prepared for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP] by Statistics Canada (1995). For information about research studies prepared for RCAP, see A Note About Sources at the beginning of this volume. Unless otherwise indicated, statistics cited in this chapter are taken from this source.

**2** Statistics Canada, 1991 Aboriginal peoples survey (APS), custom tabulations, 1994.

**3** Statistics Canada, 1991 APS, custom tabulations. The data are not adjusted for undercoverage in the survey.

**4** Statistics Canada, "Age and Sex: Aboriginal Data, 1991", Catalogue No. 93-327, 1993, Table 2.

**5** RCAP organized its own series of youth forums and youth circles in cities across the country, including Vancouver, Lethbridge, Regina, Ottawa, Montreal, Fredericton and Halifax.

**6** Benita Cohen, "Health Services Development in an Aboriginal Community: The Case of Peguis First Nation", research study prepared for RCAP (1994).

**7** RCAP, *Choosing Life: Special Report on Suicide Among Aboriginal People* (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1995), p. 30.

**8** Kathleen E. Absolon and R. Anthony Winchester, "Urban Perspectives, Cultural Identity Project, Victoria Report: Case Studies of ÔSonny' and ÔEmma'", research study prepared for RCAP (1994).

**9** Chris Lafleur, "Edmonton Youth Perspectives Project", research study prepared for RCAP (1993).

**10** Lauri Gilchrist and R. Anthony Winchester, "Urban Perspectives: Aboriginal Street Youth Study, Vancouver, Winnipeg and Montreal", research study prepared for RCAP (1995). The story of ÔMissy' is recounted in *Choosing Life* (cited in note 7), pp. 31-36.

**11** Thom Henley, *Rediscovery, Ancient Pathways æ New Directions: A Guidebook to Outdoor Education* (Vancouver: Western Canada Wilderness Committee, 1989), p. 34.

**12** Chippewa girl, age 15, quoted in Henley, *Rediscovery*, back flap.

**13** National Association of Friendship Centres, "Intervener Participation Project: Final Report to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples" (1993). (The NAFC appeared at RCAP public hearings in Ottawa on 5 November 1993.) For information about briefs submitted to RCAP, see A Note About Sources at the beginning of this volume.

**14** Armand McKenzie, "Everything has been said, we all know the solutions---a time to change and a time to act: Foundation Analysis of the Political Development of the Innu of Ntesinan", research study prepared for RCAP (1993).

**15** Lorna Williams, Sharon Wilson, Adeline Saunders and Patrick Maxcy, "Elementary Education Study: Vancouver Inner City Project, Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment and Related Applied Systems", research study prepared for RCAP (1993).

**16** Williams et al., "Elementary Education Study".

**17** Saskatchewan Indian Federated College [SIFC], "Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education: Indigenous Student Perceptions", research study prepared for RCAP (1994).

**18** SIFC, "Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education".

**19** John Dorion and K.R. Yang, "Métis Post-Secondary Education", research study prepared for RCAP (1993).

**20** W. Littlechild, Sport and the Native Population, A Proposed Sport Development Policy, Sport Issue Papers Volume 2 (Edmonton: Alberta Recreation and Parks, 1981), p. 590.

**21** Metis Nation of Alberta Association, brief submitted to RCAP (1993), p. 21.

**22** Lucille Bell, "1993 Youth Perspectives Report of Old Massett", research study prepared for RCAP (1993).

**23** Donald J. Mrozek, "Games and Sport in the Arctic", Journal of the West 26/1 (January 1987).

**24** Neil Winther, "A Comprehensive Overview of Sport and Recreation Issues Relevant to Aboriginal Peoples in Canada", research study prepared for RCAP (1994).

**25** "First Nations Running Club", brief submitted to RCAP (1992), p. 1.

**26** Winther, "A Comprehensive Overview of Sport and Recreation Issues" (cited in note 24).

**27** Initiatives such as these are explored in the Commission's special report, *Bridging the Cultural Divide: A Report on Aboriginal People and Criminal Justice in Canada* (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1996) and in our discussion on education in Volume 3, Chapter 5.

- 28** Bell, "1993 Youth Perspectives Report of Old Massett" (cited in note 22).
- 29** McDiarmid, quoted in Winther, "A Comprehensive Overview of Sport and Recreation Issues" (cited in note 24).
- 30** Winther, "A Comprehensive Overview of Sport and Recreation Issues".
- 31** Winther, "A Comprehensive Overview of Sport and Recreation Issues".
- 32** Robert Imrie and David Newhouse, "Aboriginal People and HIV/AIDS in Canada", research study prepared for RCAP (1994).
- 33** Imrie and Newhouse, "Aboriginal People and HIV/AIDS". More recent figures indicate that Health Canada was aware of 176 cases of AIDS among Aboriginal people in January 1996. See Warren Goulding, "Behind the Statistics", *Maclean's*, 15 July 1996.
- 34** NAFC, "Final Report" (cited in note 13).
- 35** Sharon Visitor, NAFC Youth Intervener Co-ordinator, interview with RCAP, Ottawa, Ontario, 7 June 1995.
- 36** Jimmy Onalik, Youth Co-ordinator, Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, interview with RCAP, Ottawa, Ontario, 5 June 1995.
- 37** Frank Anderson, Inuit Circumpolar Conference Youth Liaison Worker, interview with RCAP, Ottawa, Ontario, 7 June 1995.
- 38** Don Kerr and Andy Siggner, "Canada's Aboriginal Population, 1981-1991", research study prepared for RCAP (1995). The unemployment rate was 32.1 per cent for Inuit youth, 28.2 per cent for Métis youth, 25.7 per cent for the non-status Indian population, and 40.4 per cent among status Indians.
- 39** Habitat for Humanity Canada, "Quick Facts" and "General Information", brochures (November 1995).
- 40** Norris et al., "Projections of the Population" (cited in note 1); Statistics Canada, "Projections of the Canadian Population", unpublished, 1995; and Statistics Canada, 1991 Census, Catalogue No. 93-33, 1992.
- 41** Inuit Circumpolar Conference, *Principles and Elements for a Comprehensive Arctic Policy* (Montreal: Centre for Northern Studies and Research, 1992), p. 87.
- 42** Kenny Loon, "Foundation Analysis of the Political Development of the Crees of Quebec", research study prepared for RCAP (1993).

**43** Rich Willits-Cairn and James C. Kielsmeier, eds., *Growing Hope: A Sourcebook on Integrating Youth Service into the School Curriculum* (Roseville, Minn.: National Youth Leadership Council, 1991), p. 8. NIYLP projects included helping the Pueblo of Picuris rebuild a 250-year-old adobe church by contributing 300 handmade bricks, repairing and constructing trails and tending to Anasazi ruins at the El Morro National Monument, visiting scenic Navajo sites in Canyon de Chelly to learn about the destruction wrought by Kit Carson and the U.S. army in the 1860s, and starting a tradition of replanting peach trees in the area.

**44** National Aboriginal Youth Career and Awareness Committee, brief submitted to RCAP (1993), p. 14.