



Ottawa Inuit
Children's
Centre

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Executive Summary

NIPIVUT – OUR VOICE



Contents:

Project Background	1
Methodology	1
Key Findings	2
Demographic Profile of Families.....	4
Non-Inuit Adoptive Families	6
Agency Survey.....	6
Conclusion	7

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Photo by Michelle Valberg and OICC.

Project Background

The Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre (OICC) is a multi-service organization that provides cultural, educational, and support services to Inuit children 0-13 years and their families. The centre is recognized as an essential hub of services for Inuit families in a rapidly growing community in Ottawa.

Statistics Canada's 2006 Census data confirmed that Ottawa has the largest Inuit population outside of Northern Canada. Even so, a reported population of 725 Inuit in Ottawa falls extremely short of the estimated population of 1800 that many Inuit organizations declare as more accurate.

In January 2009, the OICC received funding from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (Urban Abo-

iginal Strategy) to conduct a community needs assessment for Inuit children 0-18 years of age and their families living in Ottawa. The purpose of the project was to collect information from parents that would support long term planning, enhance program and resource development, increase collaboration, raise awareness and improve advocacy.

Methodology

The methodology for this project combined quantitative and qualitative data collection using focus groups, individual interviews, parent questionnaires, service provider surveys, and photojournalism. Grounded in the principles of Community Based Research, and guided by a Project Advisory Committee, all project activities were culturally sensitive and respectful of parents' anonymity.



“I used to smile at everyone because everyone does that at home. They [people in Ottawa] thought I was crazy.”

The main reasons why Inuit leave their northern communities as reported by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami¹ were virtually the same as those we discovered. Access to educational and employment opportunities and proximity to family that had moved to Ottawa, were the most common reasons for relocating. Other factors that led to a move to Ottawa included improved access to health and medical services, availability of child care services, lower cost of living, and leaving abusive relationships.

Parents spoke about the many benefits of raising children in Ottawa. Inuit specific services offered by the Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre and Tungasuvvingat Inuit help families maintain their culture and language in a city far from their homeland. Access to a multitude of mainstream services was also a reported benefit. Parents were pleased to have access to a wide variety of recreational and extra-curricular activities for their children and family. They appreciated Ottawa for its availability of museums, galleries, summer festivals, parks and outdoor activities. Other positives that were shared by parents included access to health, medical and dental care, more child care choices, improved housing, access to treatment and counseling services and easy transportation.

One hundred and two parents/guardians of Inuit children between the ages of 0 – 18 years participated in this project: 84 birth parents, 14 non-Inuit adoptive parents, and 4 foster parents caring for Inuit children. One hundred and eighty-two children were represented by the parents who participated. Parents were extremely gracious and generous in sharing their experiences and we learned an extraordinary amount about the benefits and challenges of living in Ottawa.

Key Findings

A growing Inuit community in Ottawa draws many from the North as people hear from friends and relatives that “Ottawa is an Inuit friendly city.” The Inuit community in Ottawa parallels those in the North in that it is described by parents as close-knit and supportive. The majority of families have extended family in Ottawa providing a network of familial support for many. Having said that, the information shared by parents revealed many differences from homeland communities such as a higher number of single parent households, smaller family size, less use of Inuktitut and a possibly greater number of Inuit/non-Inuit marriages or relationships.

“I'm happy to be living here and raising my son. He's going to have a good education.”

Despite the many benefits of living in Ottawa expressed by parents, many challenges of living in an urban setting were reported. When asked about issues affecting their families, the most common reported by parents included living expenses, managing finances, transportation, cultural isolation, finding employment, affordable housing, health and medical care, and finding and paying for child care. Further challenges identified by parents included culture shock and adjustment to city life, discrimination, and cultural differences such as childrearing.

¹ <http://www.itk.ca/sites/default/files/InuitStatisticalProfile2008.pdf> accessed on March 27, 2009. *The Inuit Statistical Profile, ITK, 2008.*

"It was the most difficult time just being alone with my child and not knowing other family, because my parents were always there helping me with my son in the North. I was trying to go to school and work with no support."

Many parents spoke about their experiences with the Children's Aid Society and felt that increased awareness of Inuit culture and childrearing practices, combined with support for adjusting to city life was critical to maintaining custody of their children.

"Social workers cannot understand how we are brought up because they never went up there. They don't understand our traditions; we are more laid back up North than here. I heard about it over and over again, some social workers didn't understand. I saw so much of that in my building. People are losing their kids to CAS. That really broke my heart. Some of the parents would have a hard time adjusting to being down here. They got so many things to see. It's crazy down here, you know, compared to up North where everything is slow and everybody knows everybody."

Although parents are accessing a wide variety of programs and services for their family, barriers that affected access included transportation, fees, lack of information about available services, location and time of service offered, identification for child, financial restraints to pay for parking and gas, and waiting lists for services such as Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health and Sivummut Head Start. A repeated desire for Inuit-specific programs to be offered outside of Vanier was expressed. Parents living in other areas of the city felt isolated from the bulk of services delivered in Vanier.

When parents discussed what services were still needed a variety were identified ranging from more youth programming to increased and focussed settlement services for Inuit new to Ottawa. A strong desire for more cultural programs including community gatherings, Inuktitut programs, country food, Elders, and traditional skill development was expressed.

Many spoke of the need for an unstructured drop-in setting where families could gather and socialize without structured programming. Other services identified by parents included respite care, affordable housing, access to subsidized child care, family counselling, employment training, post-secondary education funding, and parenting support.

When parents were asked what they wanted non-Inuit service providers to know about Inuit in Ottawa, responses revealed a deep yearning for respect, acceptance and increased awareness and appreciation for Inuit culture.

"We have different values and morals. We have lots to offer and we are not all alcoholics and addicts."



Demographic Profile of Families

Age & Marital Status:

- 41% of parents were between 26-35 years of age, 30% were between 36-45 years of age, 11% were between 19-25 years of age, one parent was under 18 years of age, 13% were 46-55 years of age, and 2 parents were 56-65 years of age
- 52% of parents were either married or living with a partner; 48% were single
- Of the 44 parents who were either married or living common-law, 11% were married to another Inuk, 43% were either married or living common-law with a non-Inuk partner, 39% were single parents, 7% parents were non-Inuit who had either divorced or separated from an Inuk partner

Housing:

- 75% of parents rented their current home or apartment, 25% owned their homes
- 56% of parents had been living in their current home between 1-3 years, 15% between 4-6 years, 13% between 7-10 years, and 10% of parents had lived at their present address for less than one year
- 25% of parents lived in Vanier, 17% in Ottawa central/downtown, 11% lived in Nepean, 10% resided in rural east, 8% lived in Ottawa south, 6% lived in Kanata, 5% in Orleans, 4% indicated rural west, 14% lived in "other" areas of Ottawa

**"There are more things to do.
I can take my kids to events.**

There are more resources and more activities."

Education, Employment & Income:

- 32% of parents had completed a post-secondary education at either a community college or university level, 11% had completed secondary education, and 26% had completed some secondary level education
- 63% of parents were either working part-time or full-time, 25% of parents were unemployed and/or seeking employment, 12% were attending training
- 27% of parents had a family income of over \$50,000, 12% at \$40,000-\$49,999, 12% reported making \$30,000-\$39,999, 8% at \$20,000-\$29,999, 13% at \$10,000-\$19,999 13% were making below \$9,999

**"We are educated
and we should be treated
with respect."**



Language:

- 52% of parents reported that they were speaking predominantly English at home, 40% spoke both Inuktitut and English at home, and two parents spoke primarily Inuktitut
- 62% of children speak predominantly English at home, 30% of children speak Inuktitut and English at home
- 48% of parents could speak Inuktitut fluently, 32% were beginners, 7% felt they were at a conversational level, while 11% didn't speak any Inuktitut
- 49% of parents were able to understand Inuktitut fluently, 24% could understand at a beginner level, 17% were able to understand at a conversational level and 7% could not understand Inuktitut at all
- 42% of parents could read Inuktitut syllabics fluently, 17% considered themselves beginners, 7% could read at a conversational level, and 31% couldn't read Inuktitut at all

“Greater awareness of the beauty, richness and history of our culture and people, especially to avoid stereotyping.”

Relocating to Ottawa:

- 68% claimed Nunavut as their region of origin, 14% were from Nunatsiavut, 5% were from Nunavik, while 6% were from Inuvialuit
- 40% of parents had lived in Ottawa for more than ten years, 21% had been living in Ottawa between 7-10 years, 17% between 1-3 years, 11% between 4-6 years while another 11% had moved to Ottawa less than a year ago
- 7% of parents were born in Ottawa



**“Inuit love to laugh and smile.
Smile and be welcoming.
Inclusion is very important.
Do not isolate anyone.”**

- 31% moved to Ottawa for employment opportunities, 25% because family was here, 16% moved for education, 14% moved because of a relationship, 9% to have better access to health and medical services, 2% for treatment and counselling services, 16% said they moved to Ottawa for reasons including access to child care services, leaving abusive relationships, lower cost of living and wanting to be out of a small town
- 75% of parents had extended family living in Ottawa

Non-Inuit Adoptive Families

Fourteen non-Inuit adoptive families participated in this project. A total of 20 Inuit children had been adopted into the families we spoke to. In keeping with traditional Inuit adoption practices, the majority of adoptions were considered open and birth parents maintained varying degrees of contact with the children. Adoptive parents were extremely supportive of open adoption and felt that it was beneficial for their child, the birth family and their family.

“Tiguaq means the one I chose. While in English language we would say the one we would give away. But in Inuit culture, adoption is common and fairly positive. There is no shame – the birth mother is able to choose an adoptive mother.” (adoptive parent)

Adoptive parents shared their perspectives about the benefits and challenges of cross-cultural adoption and of raising Inuit children in Ottawa in general. Most parents felt that Ottawa was a great place to raise children. They appreciated the size (small) and general safety of the city, its proximity to green space and outdoor recreation activities such as skiing, access to health and medical care, the varied activities and programs for children, and the employment and educational opportunities available. Many parents spoke about the importance of living in Ottawa in order to be connected to the Inuit community and to have access to cultural programs and resources.

Barriers to accessing programs and services faced by adoptive parents included transportation, identification for their child, access to information about services, and waiting lists. The greatest barriers reported were time and location of services offered as most parents believed that Inuit specific services were too centralized in Vanier and were offered at times that conflicted with working parents.

Despite the challenges that adoptive parents spoke about, the greatest sentiment that was shared, was their immense gratitude for having the privilege of raising an Inuk child. Parents expressed their deep commitment to maintaining their child’s culture and language but recognized that they needed help to do this.

Agency Survey

Thirty community agencies contributed to the process by completing an agency survey. The survey was developed to identify the following from Inuit/Aboriginal and non-Inuit/Aboriginal organizations: whether they were serving Inuit children and their families, how many families were they serving, what services were being accessed, barriers parents face in accessing services, barriers agencies face in delivering services, gaps in services, and cultural awareness of agency staff.

“That Inuit culture is unique from other Aboriginal cultures, and the needs are different.”



“Greater awareness of the beauty, richness and history of our culture and people, especially to avoid stereotyping.”

Key Findings

- 86% of agencies were providing programs and services to Inuit children between 0-18 years of age
- 654 Inuit children were served by agencies in 2008 (could be overlap between agencies)
- 312 parents of Inuit children had been served in 2008 (excluding Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health)
- 93% of agencies did not receive targeted funds to serve Inuit children
- 90% of agencies did not receive targeted funds to serve parents of Inuit children
- 88% of agencies felt that their services did not fully meet the needs of Inuit children 0-18 years and their parents
- Identified gaps in services included financial support, housing, recreation, parenting support and child development, employment training, employment funding, cultural support, health and medical, youth, mental health, child care and advocacy

In general, the agencies that participated in this project were keen on establishing and maintaining partnerships with Inuit organizations to ensure responsive programming to Inuit children and their families. For the most part, their identified gaps in services paralleled those recognized by parents. The agencies that responded expressed a strong desire to strengthen services for Inuit children and their families, while acknowledging their limitations including lack of targeted funding and human resources. They were optimistic however, of affecting change and moving towards a deeper understanding of the needs of the community.



Conclusion

This report is the beginning of much needed dialogue about the unique needs of Inuit children and their families in Ottawa. We are confident that the information shared by parents will go a long way to raise awareness and strengthen supports, programs and resources. We look forward to continuing to work with our community partners and developing new interagency collaborations, so that together we can say that we are delivering quality and responsive services to Inuit families in Ottawa.



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This report is a summary of the full report on the information we gathered during the Community Needs Assessment. Copies of this report are available in English and Inuktitut (Pigiarniq). Please contact Karen Baker-Anderson at **613.744.3133 ext 215** or **kbaker@ottawainuitchildrens.com** to receive a copy of the full report, the executive summary or the data collection tools used e.g. parent questionnaire, agency survey and focus group questions.

