



UAKN

Urban Aboriginal  
Knowledge Network

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Réseau de connaissances des  
Autochtones en milieu urbain

Research Summaries - Vol. 1/2

## Key Findings

- Education rates and cultural awareness are both positively linked to economic success for urban Aboriginal people.
- Urban Aboriginal agencies and organizations such as Friendship Centres are instrumental in assisting Aboriginal people in accessing social, economic, and cultural services and activities.
- Urban Aboriginal poverty and related challenges linked to mental health are key challenges to address when looking to improve one's socio-economic status.
- Completion of post secondary education closes the employment gap between urban Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people.

# Urban Aboriginal Economic Participation

Selected Findings from the Urban Aboriginal  
Knowledge Network Research

## Introduction

This research brief outlines key findings of selected Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (UAKN) research projects on the topic of economic participation of the urban Aboriginal population.

The 2011 National Household Survey (NHS) data reveals that the Aboriginal population is the youngest and fastest growing population in Canada making improving economic participation, education and skills development, employment, entrepreneurship, and income all key policy considerations.

UAKN research indicates that while education and training are key factors in achieving success in economic opportunities, there are many other factors to consider when examining urban Aboriginal people's meaningful participation in the Canadian economy. For instance, one may start with creating opportunities where individuals and communities can achieve health and well being, fostering "mino-biimaadziwin" – or the good life. Barriers and the needs of the urban Aboriginal community need to be further addressed to ensure successful economic participation.

## Main Findings

UAKN project findings in this research brief reveal a theme that focuses on urban Aboriginal community development, education, and skills training as pathways to success and economic participation. A positive identity rooted in Aboriginal culture was identified as a strong indicator in improving socio-economic status. However, we must acknowledge the significant barriers that many urban Aboriginal people face undermine their opportunities for economic success.

## Barriers to Economic Participation

Quality of life (QoL) is closely connected to one's socio-economic status. When looking at key factors to increase one's QoL, Findlay et al.'s, 2014 study participants revealed factors associated heavily with economic development and participation. Some of the most important factors identified were education and training opportunities. Additional



indicators included: the importance of easy and convenient access to shopping, access to public services, importance of good neighbours and neighbourhoods, healthy lifestyles, and the importance of cultural and spiritual places. In addition to the challenges above, other barriers associated with poverty, mental health, addictions, homelessness, over-representation in the justice system, prevalence of gangs, and families under stress (Fitzmaurice, 2012). Pursuing education and training opportunities in a culturally relevant way, where there is increased community and social service funding and an increase in cultural and spiritual places, would assist in eliminating some of these barriers (Findlay et al., 2014).

Social stigmas can be connected to this when looking at income levels between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Parriag and Chaulk's 2012 study shows that, on average, Aboriginal people tended to be in lower income categories when compared to non-Aboriginal people. Fitzmaurice notes that, according to Siggner (2003), 47% of the urban Aboriginal identity population lives below the low income cut-off (LICO), compared to 21% within the non-Aboriginal urban population. However, they identify education and training as part of the solution, noting that culturally relevant supports are key for success (Fitzmaurice, 2012).

AANDC (2010) identified that "socio-economic indicators such as school attendance, post-secondary completion and employment are improving for Canada's urban Aboriginal population". Over the last twenty years a growing number of Aboriginal people have completed post-secondary education. This study also indicated employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in urban areas disappear for those who completed post-secondary education, especially university (AANDC 2010).

While there is an increase in high school and post secondary completion rates Fitzmaurice (2012) noted that these rates were not reflected equally across genders and that more attention may be needed for the urban Aboriginal male population. Further, while overall socio-economic indicators including school attendance, post-secondary completion, and employment are improving for Canada's urban Aboriginal population, they still lag behind the Canadian average.

## Reducing Barriers

Fitzmaurice (2012) argues that organizational development that includes governing councils and improvements in education, employment, and income are all key to the success for urban Aboriginal people. These can all be seen as contributing factors in establishing meaningful partnerships between communities, academic institutions, and governments where Aboriginal people can grow and flourish, while improving economic participation. Creating

innovative spaces where urban Aboriginal people can organize and govern their community needs is a strong pathway in achieving economic success.

Research further reveals that there are some significant barriers that arise for the urban Aboriginal population, specifically as it concerns financial literacy and economic well-being. Collins (2012) found that Aboriginal people often end up in cities as "economic refugees from remote communities", with no experience navigating urban services this population can be challenging to reach. Schneider and Wenger (2014) found there are variety of financial services available in urban centres but many urban Aboriginal people lack the knowledge and understanding to navigate them. As a result, Friendship Centres are often turned to for support. Building community capacity to better understand financial services is important for individual success.

The 2011 NHS shows that attainment rates for First Nation people, Inuit and Metis at the trades and college levels are comparable to the non-Aboriginal attainment rates. Still, many Aboriginal peoples do not finish high school, and their university completion rates lag behind to those of the non-Aboriginal population. (NHS 2011)

Building capacity for urban Aboriginal people includes ensuring that programs and services are rooted in culture and traditional knowledge. Scheinder and Wenger's (2014) study in Regina, Saskatchewan, identified that, when developing curriculum for their financial literacy project, there was a strong need to incorporate Aboriginal worldviews and to encompass a culturally sensitive approach, in order to eliminate barriers and to better contribute to successful and sustainable socio-economic based programs. Fitzmaurice (2012) further noted that urban Aboriginal organizations such as Friendship Centres are instrumental in ensuring that Aboriginal people have access to services.

This research all points to the importance of access to a variety of programs and services that can support individuals and families in different aspects of their lives. Jodoin's (forthcoming) research suggests that in order to build a strong economy, there is a need to further invest in the notion of building healthy communities. That is, building strong partnerships between urban Aboriginal community organizations and government service providers to improve access to services and resources around education, employment, and training for the urban Aboriginal population. Jodoin (Forthcoming) recommends that there is a need to centralize access to services and resources. As

found in other research, Jodoin's paper also revealed a strong emphasis on the inclusion of Aboriginal culture, histories, and language in the education system to ensure success.

### **Education is the Pathway to Success**

It is well supported, through UAKN research and others, that education and skills training are key pathways to economic success. For Aboriginal students in particular, student support is important. Statistics Canada (2015) demonstrated that the skills youth acquire at the end of their formal education are partly a reflection of the career plans and accompanying program choices they made throughout their education. To this end, ensuring urban Aboriginal youth have the tools and resources they need at this critical learning stage will further contribute to their success.

Based on the young and growing demographic of urban Aboriginal people, it is an important to ensure that this population has the access and the right supports to assist in career planning, employment and skills training, and education at early and post-secondary stages to ensure success in the economy. Fitzmaurice's paper pointed out, "the high school completion rates for urban Aboriginal youth have increased, as have the post secondary completion rates for young urban Aboriginal adults" (2012:14). These findings demonstrate that there is a strong desire to increase education and skills development leading to personal success.

The types of skills development and education that many Aboriginal youth are interested in extend beyond mainstream programs and directly link to positive Indigenous identities. An Aboriginal youth-driven symposium held by the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) looked at the area of skill acquisition in relation to community and cultural and traditional knowledge. The following themes were noted by urban Aboriginal youth:

High school credits related to traditional medicines, youth perceptions on participation in the business sector, cultural knowledge and language sustainability, environmental impacts faced by youth and future implications for community relationships, employment, education, etc. , culturally based sustainable approaches to apprenticeships and co-ops, availability and needs of children and youth regarding child care centres in Friendship Centres and youth and Elder relationship strengthening.

The research priorities suggested by the urban Aboriginal youth in Ontario further reiterate the themes found in the other UAKN studies that discuss the importance of culture, traditional knowledge, and reciprocal partnerships that benefit the community. For Aboriginal youth a strong sense of their Aboriginal identity is a key factor in ensuring success.

## **Conclusion**

UAKN research projects examining economic development all explored the key themes of culture and community support in achieving greater participation in the Canadian economy. Fitzmaurice (2012) examines this notion when stating that

Quality of life, self-determination, cultural distinctiveness, and Aboriginal participation in Canadian society are growing and thriving marked by experiences of cultural vitality, community development, socio-economic advances, and clear movements towards institutional control and governance (p. 37).

Urban Aboriginal participation in the Canadian economy is built on the creation of healthy communities. Continued partnerships and policy development in urban Aboriginal community development that highlights culture and community input will further ensure pathways to success and economic participation.

Access was identified as the primary barrier to improving economic participation, Findlay et al.'s (2014: 24) study participants expressed that the QoL can be enhanced through increasing and improving opportunities through education, housing, and employment. Making these connections in a culturally relevant way through policy and partnerships can aid in improving the current gaps. Policy that allows for stronger contribution and partnerships in programs, services and resources that empower individual's strong sense of culture and identity while improving economic participation, education and skills development, employment, entrepreneurship, and income will ensure pathways to success.

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