

CRDCN Indigenous Policy Research Workshop

Summary Report

September 29, 2017

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Introduction

In the fall of 2015, the Strategic Research and Statistics Directorate at Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) partnered with the Canadian Research Data Centre Network (CRDCN) to support policy relevant research using data from the 2012 cycle of the Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS). Since 1991, the APS has been one of the main data sources available to investigate the well-being of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and to provide research evidence to help adopt policies and implement programs that will better their lives.

As a result of this partnership, several research projects were conducted by CRDCN researchers to better understand various issues related to Indigenous education, employment, health and well-being. This two year research program culminated in a Policy Research Workshop held in Ottawa on May 26, 2017.

This initiative aligned well with one of the goals of the 2016-2021 CRDCN strategic plan - to maximize the relevance and application of research results for informing public policy issues in economic, social and health domains.

Hosted by Statistics Canada, the workshop brought together approximately 65 invitees to hear about and discuss the results of these research projects. Participants were drawn from academia, INAC and other federal departments, Indigenous organizations, Statistics Canada, as well as other interested stakeholders.

The workshop offered a unique and timely opportunity for participants to interact directly with highly qualified researchers and to discuss the policy relevance and implications of their findings. It also allowed them to discuss the state of the data landscape relative to Indigenous Peoples in Canada and explore data and research strategies needed to better understand the

The Aboriginal Peoples Survey

Administered by Statistics Canada, the APS is a national survey that collects data on the well-being and conditions of Indigenous Peoples living off-reserve in Canada (First Nations, Métis and Inuit). It provides key information on education, employment, health, as well as language, income, housing and mobility. It first was conducted in 1991, then in 2001, in 2006, and in 2012. The 2017 cycle is in progress.

Source: Statistics Canada.ca

determinants of Indigenous peoples' health and socio-economic well-being. Presented as key questions, the objectives of the workshop are summarized in the box below.

This report provides a summary of the research presented during the workshop and the discussion that ensued. The focus will be to highlight the recurrent themes as they relate to the workshop objectives.

Key questions

- What was learned from the research projects and how can they inform current and future policies and programs in support of Indigenous Peoples?
- To what extent do the datasets currently available through the CRDCN, including but not limited to the APS, allow us to address high priority policy questions regarding Indigenous Peoples?
- What additional data and what new research are needed to better understand the determinants of Indigenous Peoples' health and socio-economic well-being, and to help develop policies and programs that can improve health and socio-economic outcomes?

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Academic presentations and discussions

The workshop agenda included short presentations by eight CRDCN researchers. Three focused on employment and education issues and the other five on questions pertaining to health and well-being. There was considerable overlap between the two sessions however, given the interdependence of labour force status, educational outcomes and health status.

The research results and ensuing plenary discussions repeatedly underlined the continuing socio-economic and health disadvantages and challenges faced by Indigenous children, women, men and communities in Canada. Several participants pointed to the historical legacies, not least residential schooling, that are long enduring and take a lasting toll on the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples. Health outcomes remain a major concern. Analyses show that Indigenous People continue to be more likely to report poor health than non-Indigenous Canadians, and that health inequalities for various health outcomes are narrowing slowly (if at all), although they are less pronounced for those living off-reserve.

Better understanding the pathways through which Indian residential schooling has impacted health and health behaviours of survivors and their children was a focus in some studies. Adverse mental and physical health outcomes among urban Indigenous populations were associated with residential school attendance. A lasting legacy was reinforced by the finding of a negative impact not only on those forced to attend these schools, but also on generations that followed. A hopeful note, however, comes from some analyses which showed that the negative effects were somewhat mitigated by factors such as parental involvement in their children's lives and participation in sports and physical activity.

Educational outcomes were also a major focus. The educational attainment of Indigenous Peoples, though increasing over the past two decades, is still significantly below that of non-Indigenous Canadians. Persistent

educational inequalities are attributable to a range of factors including: lower socio economic status, lack of adequate funding for Indigenous schools, and culturally inappropriate curricula.

As is the case for the general population, health status and educational attainment affect an Indigenous person's labour force opportunities and participation and, thereby, earnings. Higher ratings of self-perceived health were associated with employment status, and Indigenous women with a bachelor's degree were far more likely to be employed. Overall, however, Indigenous People were less likely to be employed (about 60 % of off-reserve Indigenous Canadians were employed in 2012, compared to 72% of Non-Indigenous Canadians). In addition, while Indigenous People in full-time employment with a bachelor's degree earn about twice as much as those with less than a high-school diploma, an important wage gap remained when compared to non-Aboriginal Canadians with the same education level. There was some evidence of occupational and hierarchical segregation – among Indigenous persons who were employed, about one quarter were in sales and services and were over-represented in precarious employment.

In terms of mental health, although Indigenous Peoples in Canada have a disproportionately high rate of suicide-related behaviours compared to non-Indigenous Canadians, two-thirds of the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) 2012 Indigenous sample reported complete mental health (defined as the absence of mental illness in the past year and the presence of flourishing mental health). Moreover, three in every four who had been formerly suicidal reported having not been so for at least one year. Recovery was higher among those who spoke an Indigenous language, who had ever lived on a reservation or in an Inuit community, who were women, who had a confidant, and who were connected to traditional culture.

Learning from those who have thrived despite considerable adversity, and researching examples of such resilience, was seen by participants as one of the

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key messages emerging from the workshop. There was consensus on the need for a paradigm shift in Indigenous research to focus on strengths and assets, not just on the gaps to be filled and deficits to be addressed.

In this context, the role of culture as a possible health buffer for Indigenous Peoples generated lively discussion. While previous studies suggest that cultural connectedness and cultural continuity are positively associated with a variety of health outcomes, results from the APS studies were mixed, raising some concerns about the construct validity of the cultural variables used in the survey. A possible time-order problem was also noted: that the positive effects of culture on health may be masked by the tendency to reconnect with one's culture *after* becoming sick, which pointed to the need for longitudinal data. Thus, while culture was seen as an issue that merits further investigation, caution was urged when interpreting the results.

Taking advantage of natural experiments and learning from situations that lead to educational success was also mentioned as an avenue that should be further considered by researchers. Colleges and universities as well as schools that are closely connected to their communities are increasingly eager to learn what works and how curricula can be designed to achieve positive results. Researchers were encouraged to engage with those educational institutions to try to understand the local reality and what experiments or pilots could be undertaken to test new approaches to improve outcomes.

First Nations Information Governance Centre presentation and implications for future research

In addition to the two sessions reserved for academic presentations, the workshop also included a special presentation by the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC). Founded in 2010 by a

special mandate from the Assembly of First Nations' Chiefs, the FNIGC has introduced an important addition to the capacity and opportunity for Indigenous research in Canada. This was made clear in the presentation.

FNIGC is Canada's foremost source of information about First Nations people living *on-reserve* and in northern communities. Its core responsibility is to conduct the First Nations Regional Health Survey (FNRHS) and the First Nations Regional Early Childhood, Education and Employment Survey (FNREEES). FNIGC adopted the OCAP principles (*ownership, control, access, and possession*) to establish how First Nations data should be collected, protected, used, or shared, and to set the standards for how to conduct research with First Nations.

FNIGC's presentation was met with much interest from other participants, both for the research potential that these on-reserve surveys offer to researchers - to conduct research for FNIGC and/or for a researcher to collaborate with FNIGC - and for the intrinsic importance of research results that have been used to support programs serving Indigenous communities across Canada, including the Aboriginal Head Start Program, the Children's Oral Health Initiative, and the Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative.

FNIGC's presentation also allowed participants to consider the role of Indigenous peoples in studies proposed by non-Indigenous researchers. It was repeatedly recognized throughout the day that which questions we choose to ask and how we choose to frame them fundamentally affect the value of the research we do and the policy outcomes that will be pursued. When engaging in Indigenous data collection, research and policy development, non-Indigenous researchers often (unconsciously) use colonial models and concepts with the result that biases may be introduced with potentially negative consequences for the interpretation and application of the findings.

A strong consensus towards committing, both intellectually and emotionally, to the mantra "Nothing about us, without us" emerged from this discussion, with three main implications. First, the introduction of

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cultural sensitivity training programs in university curricula was recommended to help researchers integrate the collective history and experience of Indigenous Peoples (coined as *Indigenous Social Theory* by one participant) in their conceptual, theoretical and methodological approaches. Second, Indigenous Peoples should be directly engaged very early on in research projects (as suggested by OCAP principles adopted by the FNIGC) to ensure that research questions and policy directions are relevant to Indigenous Peoples, and to provide contextual understanding of local realities. Finally, quantitative analyses should be complemented by qualitative research. For many participants, quantitative research was first and foremost seen as a springboard for engaging in storytelling.

Several papers presented at the workshop actually reflected this engagement, either because they had been undertaken in collaboration with an Indigenous community or because they had been prepared by an Indigenous scholar. One research paper examining long-term mental health outcomes among Indigenous teenage mothers was particularly instructive in demonstrating the value of having Indigenous insights to help make sense of research results. In contrast to findings from studies examining the impact of early pregnancy in populations of European descent, this study found no association between teenage pregnancy and long-term mental health status among Indigenous women. This puzzling result started to make more sense when it was suggested that early pregnancy was the norm in Indigenous communities from a historical standpoint, and thus did not carry the same stigma as that for teenagers of European descent.

Several examples from various government departments or agencies mentioned throughout the day showed that the commitment to the direct and early engagement of Indigenous Peoples is actually being institutionalized through new rules and policies, changing the way research about Indigenous Peoples is being framed and funded in Canada. In collaboration

with Indigenous academics, SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) for instance, has revisited its definition of Aboriginal research as well as its guidelines for peer review, institutionalizing the need for Indigenous Peoples' involvement. It is currently the only granting agency in the world to have these mechanisms and policies in place. CIHR (Canadian Institute for Health Research) is also committed to increasing its Aboriginal health research investment to 4.6 per cent of its research budget (that is, to \$46 million) and to supporting Indigenous scholars. Such reforms and initiatives will play a key role in helping define research policy questions and in collecting and analyzing data that is relevant for, and respectful of, different Indigenous groups.

Data requirements and strategies

An objective of the workshop was to consider data and research strategies needed to better understand the determinants of Indigenous Peoples' health and socio-economic well-being. Various data challenges and gaps were identified by participants.

The absence of provincial and inter-provincial Indigenous education indicators was identified as an important gap - the lack of good quality data about Indigenous students' experience and performance through K-12 and beyond. Canada lags behind the U.S. in this regard, with British Columbia being the only province that has an Indigenous identifier in the core competency tests that measure reading, writing and arithmetic skills at the school district level. The decision by the Council of Ministers of Education Canada, to support an Indigenous identifier in the next round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2018, was seen as a very positive and commendable development. It will provide the first interprovincial data regarding how Indigenous children are performing (although only seven provinces have agreed so far to take part in this initiative).

More generally, it is the paucity of data for Indigenous youth in all aspects that was seen as problematic. Early

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childhood, it was argued, is crucial in determining later-life paths. Educational policy interventions must therefore start early to improve outcomes. It was thus recommended that information on children under the age of 5, who are currently excluded from the Aboriginal Peoples Survey, be included in future cycles.

Insufficient sample size was another repeatedly mentioned issue. In the case of the APS, sample size was especially a problem when researchers attempted to examine Indigenous sub-groups (including, notably, Inuit). It was further noted that the small sample size of Indigenous respondents is also a problem in other national surveys and that, as a consequence, these data are not being used. Participants strongly favored oversampling because it would facilitate benchmarking relative to non-Indigenous Canadians.

The wish list of participants for additional data collection was quite extensive. Notably, it included additional questions about the aspirations and life goals of Indigenous Peoples to inform culturally relevant policy, perceptions of discrimination, experiences of Indigenous mothers from in-utero to birth, and the inclusion of a complete mental health scale. Adopting a longitudinal design for the APS was also suggested.

While proposing these additions, the cost and respondent burden of surveys was acknowledged and therefore the need to be strategic in choosing which data to invest resources to collect. It was also recognized that what is knowable is changing rapidly given increased access to administrative data and the ability to link these data. One proposed solution was to create communities of practice that would allow us to better understand, use, cull and combine the data that *are* available to us, including administrative data. A complementary suggestion was to develop an Aboriginal data development map, again including administrative data, building upon the work that was done in 2011 by the Council of Ministers of Education.

Observations and reflections

The workshop began on a note of optimism and openness. “Curious”, “thankful”, “inspired”, “excited”,

“engaged” and even “jazzed,” were among the words used to summarize participants’ expectations for the day. At the end of the day, without oversimplifying the wide-ranging discussion that took place on such complex issues as mental health, educational achievement, income insecurity, historical trauma, and intergenerational transmission of culture, words that capture the main messages of the workshop and should inform future policy research on Indigenous issues include: “ethics,” “respect,” “collaboration,” “synergy,” and “strength”.

Ethics: It was repeatedly recognized throughout the day that which questions researchers choose to ask and how they choose to frame them fundamentally affect the value of the research and the policy outcomes that are pursued. Participants were reminded that part of engaging in Indigenous research and policy development is to recognize that researchers using models and data developed from a colonial mindset have already done significant harm and could indeed do more harm, wittingly or not. It was noted that discrimination and racism are endemic to the work and lives of Indigenous Peoples, and that cultural sensitivity training to understand the collective history and experience of Indigenous Peoples is a commitment that researchers should be prepared to make.

Respect: There was acute awareness that sound research requires the direct engagement of Indigenous Peoples to help contextualize the data and understand local realities. It was argued that we need to more deeply understand Indigenous Peoples’ aspirations and life goals and replace definition of terms and needs from *outside* the community by definition from *within* the Indigenous communities so as to develop research questions and policy directions that will be appropriate and relevant. Researchers were strongly encouraged to commit to the mantra “Nothing about us, without us,” along with the OCAP principles proposed by the FNIGC. At the same time the need for workable solutions was recognized, such that research is not unduly discouraged.

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Collaboration A variety of data challenges and data gaps were identified throughout the day. The mapping of the Indigenous data landscape to better take stock of the datasets that *are* available and the development of communities of practice to encourage collaboration among researchers and with Indigenous communities were proposed as two helpful complementary steps. Perhaps more importantly, the creation of synergies among the various data producers, including Statistics Canada, INAC, FNIGC, as well as other ministries interested in Indigenous issues, was seen as a key condition to facing these challenges and filling these gaps, given that financial resources are limited and respondent burden is always a constraint. Such collaborations and synergies will also ensure that strategic decisions regarding data collection and research priorities meet not only policy needs but also Indigenous Peoples' aspirations.

Strength: It was noted that, too often, we focus on the gaps to be filled and deficits to be addressed, and that we need to shift our thinking towards the strengths and assets that Indigenous Peoples have and represent. Researchers were encouraged to focus more on organically supported experimentation and scaling up local efforts that are meeting with success. More generally, researchers were encouraged to connect quantitative data analyses with qualitative methods.

In the spirit of combining our collective strengths and assets, the hope is that participants left the workshop with an even more acute sense of optimism and openness, a greater awareness of both what makes us distinct from one another and what can unite us, as well as the renewed desire to engage even more resolutely in these critical research and policy issues in collaborative ways.

Next steps

In the context of the CRDCN's strategic priority to develop collaborative policy research programs with partner agencies and stakeholder organizations, possible next steps to build on the success of these research projects and one-day workshop could include:

- 1) Work with Statistics Canada and INAC regarding the 2017 cycle of the APS, to develop a call for proposals and to identify financial support.
- 2) Encourage Statistics Canada to review, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, the information that is collected in relation to Indigenous Peoples, noting especially the need for more information related to children.
- 3) Collaborate with SSHRC and CIHR in their on-going programmatic commitments to advance Indigenous research.
- 4) Explore with INAC the possibility of funding a policy relevant collaborative research initiative that would facilitate the joint engagement of Indigenous communities and university researchers to pursue questions that are co-created and would lead to direct engagement of Indigenous Peoples in the development and implementation of policy interventions.
- 5) Explore with FNIGC the possibility of developing joint research initiatives and facilitating access to on-reserve data sources.
- 6) Collaborate with appropriate agencies/groups, to address concerns that have arisen in connection with the use of Indigenous Peoples identifiers in survey, census, and administrative data file, recognizing the critical importance of these identifiers for the development of evidence-based policies intended to improve the lives of Indigenous Peoples.