Community Matters

Community Safety

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Summer Edition

Edmonton Social Planning Council

edmonton SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL

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Community Matters

Welcome to the second issue of our new quarterly publication, Community Matters.

As with our inaugural issue in March 2022, Community Matters aims to inform the community about social issues that impact citizens and connect the dots between social issues, evidence, and policy. We aim to use this space to give a voice to local agencies, ESPC volunteer writers, and staff members alike.

Each edition will spotlight a specific social issue and demonstrate the intersectional nature and impact on equality. Our goal is to use evidence as we continue to inform on the issues affecting individuals and families.

While our first issue focused on gender (in)equity, this issue will focus on community safety.

Community safety has many components and facets. Safety can be defined and experienced differently by each community and each person's unique lived experience. Many think community safety means responding to crimes and social disorders through policing and the criminal justice system. The dialogue needs to be even more broadly focused on preventative measures and promoting social cohesion.

When discussing community safety, we need to frame the conversation around promoting a community that is inclusive to everyone, especially those who are marginalized. If we center the conversation exclusively to the concerns of dominant or privileged groups, we run the risk of further endangering or marginalizing those who have already been struggling.

Crime in Chinatown, safety concerns at Edmonton transit facilities, hate-motivated crimes against Black and Muslim women, and the alarming rates of lives lost due to drug overdoses and poisoning are in part tied to the still unresolved social problems such as affordable housing challenges and the rise of homelessness, the closure of safe consumption sites, untreated mental health and trauma, food insecurity, income inequality, systemic racism, gender inequity, and more. A failure to meaningfully address these issues will only exacerbate wider community safety concerns and the incidences of crime.

A community that addresses everyone’s basic needs and supports, will reduce the number of incidences where police response is necessary. Community safety can be fostered and supported through relationships and connectivity.

With this issue of Community Matters, we hope to play a part in shifting this mindset and amplifying the voices of those who felt very much unsafe, excluded or isolated in their own communities for quite some time. This edition includes topics surrounding areas of School Resources Officers, Universal Basic Income, Edmonton Indigenous Court, and Food Insecurity; we have input from organizations and agencies like Bear Clan, Community Outreach Transit Team, Neighbourhood Empowerment Team, Boyle MacCauley Health Centre and The Pride Centre. We invite readers to delve deeper into these topics.

We hope this endeavour broadens the conversation and helps spark positive social change amid a truly challenging period for our city.

- Susan Morrissey, Executive Director

Neighbourhood Empowerment Team: Creating Safety through Connection

Written by Amanda Labonte

The Neighbourhood Empowerment Team (NET) is a partnership between the City of Edmonton, Edmonton Police Service, The Family Centre, and the United Way of Alberta Capital Region. (1) NET "works with residents, community, businesses, and organizations to build solutions to create safe and vibrant neighbourhoods and communities." (1) The NET teams' focus is to address community safety and it "achieves this by working with the community to address the factors that contribute to the issue, along with reducing the fear of crime and social disorder by using problem-solving approaches."

Three members of the NET team joined us for a round table discussion on the work that is being done in the community. We were joined by Connie Marciniuk, Community Safety Liaison with the City of Edmonton; Lawrence Jensen, Community Programming Education Director and Edmonton Police Service Liaison; as well as Hannah Weir, Youth Liaison with The Family Centre.

What makes NET unique?

Lawrence

Really, it's all about bringing all the right resources together to address crime and disorder or whatever the community concerns are and finding an efficient way of dealing with them.

Instead of our [police] members having to go through 311 they can literally just go to our community safety liaison and access that resource or find the appropriate response and then leave it in their hands.

Connie

Some of the issues that come to the police, quite often it's recognizing that there's multiple contributing factors to any one of those issues and that's part of the beauty of NET, is that we can recognize it isn't just a policing issue. With the connections that we have in the communities that we work in; it's then bringing in the appropriate resources to come together and find a solution. So, it's not a police solution, it's not a city solution, it's not a family centre solution necessarily, it's coming together to try to figure out all of those facets and how we can contribute to resolving the issue.

We try to actively engage community stakeholders in those spaces too because *our work is less meaningful if it's not meaningful to the community*.

Hannah

It's in our name. It's Neighborhood Empowerment Team. We don't do things for the community we do things with the community. Our goal is to empower communities to work collaboratively to address their own issues and create the answers themselves. We're just playing a very supporting role. It's about building capacity within a community and creating sustainability.

What's maybe unique about NET is having the three active partners; the city, the Family Centre, and the police. Each brings something very unique to the partnership. The police provide a lot of resources and crime and safety stats that really guide our work, and the city is able to provide a lot of resources to our projects. Then the Family Centre being the nonprofit entity, we're able to apply for grant funding that the other two partners aren't able to. The three active partners fill in gaps that we need to be able to collectively address and respond to in the community.

How is community safety defined by the people you engage with?

Connie

That definition of safety can be really individual and unique depending on what intersections and lens an individual comes from and a community comes from.

Sometimes some of our work around safety looks like inclusivity and making sure that we're recognizing that. Using the example of the encampments, part of the information we can share is that having an encampment doesn't necessarily cause criminal behavior. That it isn't necessarily, and it most definitely isn't always our marginalized Edmontonians who are contributing to crime and disorder in neighborhoods.

Youth, Basketball and Empowerment

The group shared a story about youth who were playing basketball at a community school and some residents had filed complaints to both the school and police. The school took down the basketball hoops, the community league got involved, and social media was used as an outlet for peoples' anger.

NET became involved and the Team spoke with the young people playing basketball, and residents in the area, and got a broad lens of input within the neighbourhood. The youth told the Team that they lived in the neighbourhood and had been school friends. NET arranged a meeting at the community league where the community came together and had a circle discussion. There were uniformed police, the youth, community league members, and parents, everyone was given a chance to speak. The community came together as a collective.

Some of the community members present stated they liked having the youth on the courts as this made them the eyes and ears of the neighbourhood and that crime is less likely to happen when people are out in the community. It was a lens shifting conversation.

The end result, according to the Team, was that not only were the youth heard in that community, but the community came together to help the youth feel included. This resulted in discussions of a community BBQ and basketball tournament.

When we humanize our marginalized populations when we humanize anybody, we are bringing a little bit more of a trauma informed lens to some of those safety issues.

Hannah

A really key point to our work is that it depends on how you define community. I mean communities can be sort of geographical in nature, but they can also be looked at as ethnic or cultural communities, gender and sexual [diverse] communities, and even age communities. It just depends really on how one would identify and how they express what community they affiliate with. A lot of times when we think of community we just think of neighborhoods.

Sometimes it is as simple as maybe just a lack of understanding and a lack of knowledge and education about a community that is different from yours. Just bringing communities together to learn about each other and build some rapport and relationships and understanding can contribute to community safety.

There is stigma about people experiencing poverty as being dangerous or 'troublemakers' in the community – what would you say to that? How does NET shift the conversation?

Connie

I think our communities are quite empathetic, but they just might not necessarily be aware of some of the contributing factors to individuals' current situations. So, when I think of poverty, I think of some of our folks that are unfortunately unhoused and living on the streets or in shelters. We have affordable housing units that are going up in our city and there's a lot of community consultation that happens around that. Ones that we've been able to be a part of, instead of 'what is happening with this housing site, what's it going to bring into my neighborhood?' The conversations with a different lens can then be 'if you engage with the individuals that are living there, they become part of your neighborhood and they become part of the greater cohort which then benefits the community.'

Youth, Community and Graduation

The Team shared a story about a community that had noticed an increase in crime around high school graduation. The community felt there was a possible correlation between the stress of exams and financial stresses around the cost of graduation that contributed to the increase in crime. The community requested support to create an event to help alleviate some of that financial strain.

The community had the idea to hold a 2-day event of giving out graduation dresses. They were connected to an organization that provides gently used dresses. The youth were invited to come and select a dress. The organization that helped provide the initial slate of dresses stated it was the most well-attended event they had done to date.

The Team shared with us how impactful this coming together of the community was. Watching the community members bring in dresses for the event, supporting the event, and connecting with the youth was deeply moving.

While the group could not say whether this impacted the rise in crime or not, the community connection to the youth was such that the community plans to hold the event annually. This underscores that a community event or initiative like this has the potential to strengthen community ties and relationships, promote cohesion, strengthen our social fabric and improve overall community well-being.

Then thinking about our individuals that are unfortunately having to live in encampments. Again, some of it is just shifting the lens and supporting people through that shift to understand that if somebody is living on the streets it's not because of various choices they've made necessarily it's a result of the trauma they've experienced.

> *There is this continuum that does contribute to safety because when we're inclusive and connected communities are inherently safer.*

Hannah

Using the example of food insecurity, it does negatively impact your ability to participate fully in community. There is a lot of correlation between lack of access to food and crime.

Some of the projects and work that we do focuses on food security for students in school. If a student doesn't have access to food, they're not able to concentrate and do well in school. Then fast forward into their life, if they don't graduate from high school then they're statistically more likely to be involved in crime later on because they don't have a high school diploma.

We try and work more upstream with some of our responses to poverty. It is very systemic; you're not going to see results or impact next week. Some of it is literally throughout the whole course of a student's life. We absolutely try and take a really holistic wrap-around approach to the way that we look at poverty and how it interacts with communities.

Lawrence

The communities are engaged with some of these issues. When we go back to the shelter that was put up near Ritchie last year, our involvement with helping set up the community meetings and how those community meetings turn from being quite reactive against that shelter being set up to being actually quite supportive, there's that bridging of those gaps. Creating a level playing field and understanding because there's all those fears. So, you help people understand, and then when they understand they're more likely to support what's going on. I think that was a really good success factor because it didn't turn out as predicted by members in the area, it actually turned out quite well.

Closing Thoughts

During the conversation, the interviewer put forward a comment regarding how anyone can end up in a situation of poverty. The three members agreed that life situations, grief, trauma, and current rising costs contribute to stressors that impact people's ability to stay above the poverty line.

As we concluded the conversation it is hard to convey the passion this group of people expressed in this conversation. There is a passion for community, a passion for connection, and a passion for collaboration. Connie shared "when it comes to safety there's expertise within the community and there's capacity within the community." Hannah stated, "inclusivity begins with a hello. It really does." Lawrence said, "we really don't know how 5, 6, 7 years from now what that small impact is going to do in the life of that youth. How it's going to impact our work but that means you have to be there as an organization 6-7 years later" which means "one of the critical areas especially for our partners is sustainable funding and funding that's based upon collaboration."

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Spreading the Good Love: An Interview with Bear Clan Patrol's Judith Gale

Written by Brett Lambert

The Bear Clan Patrol's origins can be traced back to 1992 in Winnipeg, where it was established to provide safety and security to the urban Indigenous community, many of whom are concentrated within inner-city neighbourhoods. Their network of volunteers does outreach work within the community to provide support to community through non-violent, non-threatening, and non-judgmental ways.

The Bear Clan Patrol has since expanded to other cities, which include Calgary, Lethbridge (named SAGE Clan), and Edmonton. Bear Clan Beaver Hills House Edmonton arrived in November 2020. They walk around the city's downtown core with carts filled with supplies to give to community members and engage with community members on a personal level. The Patrol emphasizes the importance of ensuring that individuals feel wanted, seen, and that they are special.

We sat down with the founder Judith Gale to talk about Bear Clan's mission.

To start off, can you please give a brief overview of the work Bear Clan does?

There are Bear Clan Patrols all over Turtle Island with 36 chapters found in Canada and the United States. Edmonton is the 36th chapter. Each chapter works a bit differently and responds to community concerns accordingly. There are multiple patrols within Winnipeg and Calgary's patrol is fairly militant.

The way I describe Bear Clan is that we are all about spreading the good love. We provide continuity for our brothers and sisters by patrolling the inner city neighbourhoods as well as the 118 Avenue area and Boyle/McCauley where possible. Through community donations, our team of volunteers provide supplies to those in need. This can include clothing, water, warm meals, and others.

Fundamentally, our brothers and sisters want to be listened to and want somebody to hug. Through our interactions, they are in a better mood, have a better outlook, and provide a sense of community. We are here to serve you. I have never heard more "God bless you!" phrases outside of church.

We also do a lot of de-escalation work on the streets. We stop fights and dissuade disgruntled people from destroying property, stopping them from altercations with security guards.

We help with the missing and the missed. If there is a family looking for loved ones who have gone missing, we have eyeballs on the street keeping track of people's whereabouts to assist in relocating and reuniting people. We help to relay messages and bridge the gap between family and the street.

Our work revolves around what I call the three C's. No comparing, no complaining, and no criticizing. We adopt a non-judgmental outlook to what we do.

What are the greatest strengths Bear Clan has in comparison to more mainstream measures?

The people we interact with tell me they get food at Hope Mission, but nobody feeds up the kindness and feeds the spirit like we do.

We provide a sense of community; we walk with them and gift them support and help them make different choices when they are ready. It is important to emphasize that the support we provide are not handouts – that's what the government provides – they are gifts.

What role does Bear Clan have in larger movements to fight colonialism and aid in true reconciliation?

We contribute to those movements by helping to plan events like the Red Dress Day every May 5th. We provide a platform for the families of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, giving them life and honoring them.

This is also a work in progress for me because the Creator tests me sometimes, but we try to be kind to unkind people. This means certain police officers or security guards who are acting maliciously toward our brothers and sisters. It is hard to be kind in all circumstances, but it is something we all can work on.

What is one message you wish other organizations and the wider criminal justice system could take away from your work?

We have to humanize our brothers and sisters rather than dehumanize them. Punitive measures for the unhoused take us in the wrong direction. It is important to promote Housing First. After someone has a stable home situation, they do not do crimes of opportunity or petty crimes. Once you address other aspects of their situation, such as addictions and mental health, then they can have a future.

What can settlers who wish to be allies do to support your work?

Volunteer your time. Anyone is welcome to volunteer with Bear Clan Patrol as much as they want to. You have to be prepared to walk the walk, in addition, to talk the talk. You also must break down your own white fragility and walk with your brothers and sisters. I emphasize that you walk with them, not in front of them, not behind them, but beside them.

To learn more about the Bear Clan Patrol and to volunteer, contact them at 780-909-9077 or bearclanbeaverhillshouse@gmail.com.

Community Outreach Transit Team: Building Trust through Unlimited Second Chances

Written by Amanda Labonte

The Community Outreach Transit Team (COTT) is a partnership between the City of Edmonton and Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society that was launched in September of 2021. (1, 2) COTT connects Transit Peace Officers and Bent Arrow outreach workers to “provide compassionate support for individuals [community members] to address concerns such as housing, mental health, substance use and financial assistance." (1) The work is rooted in relationship building and connection. (1, 2).

Robert Solem, an Outreach Worker with Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society, and Wes McConnell, an Edmonton Transit Peace Officer shared with us the work they are doing.

Flexibility and Accessibility in the Work

Solem and McConnell explained the importance of flexibility in their schedules and how the Team is a mobile unit. They stated that because of this type of working style, they can meet clients where they are, when they are needed. Solem and McConnell stated that the Team works shifts between 8:00 AM to 10:00 PM and will be transitioning to seven days a week from 7:00 AM to 2:00 AM to better accommodate clients starting in September 2022.

Further, the way the unit is structured creates broader accessibility to resources for clients. For example, being a place to receive critical phone calls, such as from Alberta Works, where COTT can then connect with the client, and provide transportation to appointments if needed. The Team goes to find and connect with the client in the community, wherever the client may be. This ensures COTT can provide a consistent presence of support in the lives of the people they serve.

Consistency and Accountability

Solem and McConnell expressed how consistency is key to the work they do, and they recognize consistency is something many of the people they work with have not experienced. “When they [clients] say we're going to meet you somewhere and we actually show up and we actually show up every time or we actually call them every time, then we quickly build trust.”

"That's Just Joe" - Wes McConnelly

Every once in a while you'll have the public coming up to you and pointing out a community member and being like" I think something is wrong with that person" or "this person is making us very uncomfortable." I'll look over and I'll be like, "well that's just Joe. This is actually a pretty good day for Joe. So you don't have to worry about him." Or maybe, "Joe's having a little bit of a hard day today but he's actually doing pretty good and it's very clear to us he's sleeping."

Then you get like this kind of not really understanding look in their face because I would imagine that they assume that I'm going to be like "Oh well I'm going to go get rid of them for you."

The point the team was making in providing us this example was that the voices of authority, such as a Peace Officer, can help shift peoples' perceptions and shift the conversation. By giving the person a name, it shows the team has a relationship to the person and this can create empathy. The hope, the team told us is that this facilitates positive conversation when the community member returns home or into the community at large. I has the potential to create positive future experiences.

Building Trust and Relationship

A key component to the work of COTT expressed by Solem and McConnell is the importance of building trust, and how this takes time and patience. "Consistency builds trust and, is what's needed for them [clients] to be able to actually open up about what needs to actually happen." Solem and McConnell explained that as the relationship builds over time and clients can rely on COTT. "We can be assisting them with that actual goal and not just the surface 'I want to be sober' and 'I want a house conversation.' Now we have to get into the harder questions. So, it's easier to do that once you build a relationship."

Solem and McConnell stated, "when someone is comfortable enough to talk about their trauma and how, maybe, any kind of racism or abuse or anything like that they experience. That they may start to share that with us whether it be specific or general, we're not dismissing that. We are actually listening to what they have to say. This leads to more trust, warmer relationships being built and more of an understanding for us on where they're coming from, what they've gone through and how they filter the world around them. So, it helps us help them move forward."

Community Perceptions

We asked Solem and McConnell what their thoughts were around community perceptions of people using transit as a place to consume substances or sleep, and how the community often regards these people as dangerous. Here's what they had to say:

"These are just people who are dealing with trauma, whatever that trauma might be. What we see and what the public sees is the self-treatment of that trauma and the mental health that comes along with your substance use and untreated diagnosis.

As an outreach worker I would say that people who are in the transportation buildings doing drugs or passing out or whatever they're doing; these people aren't maliciously coming into this station sitting on the stairs and doing drugs in front of people just to do that. Like that's never going through their minds. *They're looking for a comfortable place that they can do what they need to do to treat symptoms of their trauma.*"

Safety

We wanted to ask Solem and McConnell some questions around how COTT increases safety for the people they serve. This is what they had to say:

"There are peace officers out there all the time and they [clients] know that if they happen to overdose [while in transit stations] someone is going to walk by them. Someone is going to have a much higher chance of someone providing naloxone or narcan to be able to bring them out of that overdose."

For the community members who may be feeling apprehensive or unsafe when using transit; McConnelly stated, "I always will caution people on [causing] any kind of conflict any kind of challenging. Whenever they come to LRT stations or the bus stations, to be cordial with people, be pleasant with people and you know keep yourself out of any kind of conflict. Keep moving, which is the point of a bus and train service anyway."

> *Our rules are unlimited second chances and we meet you where you're at. So if your goal is to get ID and we have to meet you 20 times to be able to get your ID, great let's do that! And we're going to build a solid relationship.*

Challenges

Solem and McConnell discussed some of the challenges. They discussed an overall frustration with a lack of community resources and inconsistent funding. They also recognized that many social agencies are struggling, but argued that more needs to be done to support community members.

They discussed how timely their work can be sometimes. When a person is ready for help, it is important for the resource or space to be available immediately. They shared a story of taking the same client in the early morning, for 5 days in a row, to try to get the client into a detox centre, but the centre was full and could not take the client until the fifth day. They expressed how frustrating and discouraging this was for themselves, but also for the client.

Solem stated, "[when] we have somebody who's in a waking nightmare walking down the street and there is no place for them to go, we are failing. I just think we can do better."

Closing

Despite the challenges, the Team holds a lot of hope. They discussed how while currently the COTT project has two teams, the project is growing and will expand to seven teams by September of this year.

If you would like to learn more about COTT or Bent Arrow, please visit their websites.

One Client's Journey with COTT – Robert Solem

COTT described an experience supporting a client and the various barriers their client experienced. The client was met in December and was loitering at one of the LRT stations. COTT spoke with the individual for a while and got them a meal. Following that the Team took the client to Access 24/7 and from there took the client to a detox centre. Once the client finished their detox, COTT helped the client secure their AISH funding. This was something the client had not been able to access on their own due to several barriers. COTT supported the client into transitional housing and just last week were able to move the client into their own place. COTT members stated "this is a credit to the city that they're doing this program because that's what we need to do. That's how we clear out the stations long term."

COTT pointed out several variables that can come into play. They stated that in this case the client already had been approved for AISH funding and had only been unable to access it. If the client had not yet secured their AISH funding it would have taken several more weeks to secure housing. COTT expressed how much time needs to be invested in helping people, they met this client in December, and only as of mid-June had the client secured housing. Further, COTT stated that part of the success was that this client *had a consistent supporting team helping each step of the way*, that people can get lost in a system of multiple agencies.

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Universal Basic Income to Increase Community Safety

Written by Jordan Clark Marcichiw

Universal Basic Income

Basic Income Alberta, a grassroots movement advocating for federal Universal Basic Income (UBI) policies, states "a basic income is a monthly, upfront cash payment delivered unconditionally to all individuals to cover the essential costs of living. It is then taxable based on total income." (1) Under a basic income model, every single Canadian household would have access to a basic income regardless of who they are or whether they are able or willing to work. Basic income policies ensure each and every member of society is upheld to a basic level of human dignity and respect.

Conversations among researchers and politicians around UBI projects are not new. In 1974, researchers piloted a UBI experiment in Dauphin, Manitoba, titled "Mincome." (2) Though the project was terminated early due to high costs and underfunding, experiment data from Evelyn Forget, a leading expert in UBI, shows Mincome resulted in an 8.5% reduction in the rate of hospitalizations, an increase of teenagers completing high school, and did not serve to discourage people from working or seeking work (2).

Though UBI projects are heavily criticized for their high upfront costs, UBI advocates argue the projected downstream savings make it a much more affordable and realistic program. Currently, Canada spends approximately $73-$86 billion per year responding to issues of poverty through the cost of healthcare, housing, and the criminal justice system. (3) Advocates indicate UBI programs could generate an estimated $10 billion in tax revenues and create "hundreds of thousands of jobs." (3) A basic income could also reduce barriers for individuals accessing post-secondary education, resulting in a more educated population, and potentially fostering more innovation and diversity in small businesses. (2)

Universal Basic Income, Crime Rates and Community Safety

Considerable research has shown the connection between poverty and property crimes, and emerging research is showing a connection between poverty and violent crimes, including domestic violence. (4) This is not to say individuals who experience poverty are inherently more likely to be violent and engage in criminal behaviour. Rather, criminologists

suggest a direct relationship exists between property crimes and material deprivation as property crimes can be a means for individuals to make money. (4) More complex, however, is the relationship between poverty and violence. Researchers hypothesize this connection could be explained by UBI projects like Mincome aiding in reducing stress (specifically, financial stress), therefore reducing the likelihood of violence. (4) Others hypothesize the reduction of poverty results in increased experiences of belonging to their community, thus reducing the perceived benefits of crime. (5) Having a sense of belonging can increase an individual's resilience and ability to cope, allowing them to engage in safer and more pro-social behaviours. (6) Unfortunately, people who experience poverty are six times more likely to experience loneliness due to a lack of opportunity. (7) "Social engagement has been commodified; it's increasingly a privilege of wealth. Adult education, fitness programs and social activities like music concerts, dancing and bingo are expensive" (7, pg. 3).

Regardless of the reason, the evidence supports the notion that UBI programs can reduce criminal involvement, thus making our communities a safer place (4, 5) and reducing the taxpayer burden of funding expensive corrections and criminal justice programs. (3)

What Can I Do?

- Basic Income Alberta (www.basicincomealberta.ca) offers a variety of education and advocacy around supporting a basic income. Visit their website to find a customizable letter template to write to your representatives, or to find other advocacy materials.
- Vote! Research political party platforms to learn about their position on UBI in Canada and vote for the parties that most align with your views.
- Support existing UBI projects across the globe and request for more projects to be explored in Canada.

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Jordan Clark Marcichiw (she/her) is a social worker who is passionate about spreading knowledge and advocating for systems change for the betterment of all individuals. Her personal interests include hiking, kayaking, skiing, playing slopitch, reading, and adventuring with her pup.

2SLGBTQIA+, Safe Spaces, and the Intersections of Neurodiversity and Mental Wellness

Written by Amanda Labonte & Jenna Robinson

The Pride Centre of Edmonton is an organization that "provides a non-judgmental, welcoming space where people of all attractions, identities, and expressions can be themselves, find support, meet new people, and be part of a caring community" (Pride Centre Edmonton, 2022). It was established in 1971 with the name GATE (Gay Alliance Toward Equality) Edmonton. In 1987, it was renamed the Gay and Lesbian Community Centre of Edmonton (GLCCE), and changed again in 2004, reflecting its current title, Pride Centre of Edmonton. They provide numerous supports for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and have created multiple programs including for youth, seniors, and refugees. This organization creates and maintains safety.

We connected with Shawndy Kowalchuk (she/her), the Youth Program Director of the Pride Centre, for a discussion on what safe spaces look and feel like for those of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Our interview examined the intersection of neurodiversity, experiences of mental unwellness, and 2SLGBTQIA+ persons.

Feelings of Safety

We began by asking about how some of the folks who access Pride Centre of Edmonton's services define safety in their neighbourhoods and the community. Kowalchuk stated that "a main theme amongst anyone I talk to, or anyone in this community [2SLGBTQIA+], is feeling safe to be themselves." Kowalchuk stated it is important to challenge gender stereotypes and that the Pride Centre is often "the only safe space; they come [to the Pride Centre] physically because this place doesn't exist anywhere else for them." For many folks, their homes, neighbourhoods and schools are not safe and people do not "feel safe to be who they are." Further, Kowalchuk identified that some supports continue to remain 'invisible' because they need to "remain under the radar" for safety reasons. This can result in resources being left unknown and relies on service providers "knowing the right thing to ask."

2SLGBTQIA+ folks living in rural communities can experience heightened isolation, as they are removed from many of the safe and inclusive spaces that urban centres can provide. This was particularly true before the COVID-19 pandemic,

but one benefit of COVID-19 Kowalchuck shared was the forced expansion of programming to virtual platforms. Kowalchuk stated that previously the Pride Centre of Edmonton "had the odd Zoom show or something, but they didn't have it in the same capacity." Kowalchuck was ecstatic about the ability to 'reach' more 2SLGBTQIA+ folks because of online platforms. For rural youth particularly, Kowalchuck stated accessing the virtual programs can be life-changing in that "they can't come back tomorrow to the Pride Centre, and while they have to wait a week, at least they have this once a week to look forward to."

Pride Centre and Community Safety

Through our discussion with Kowalchuck, it was clear that creating and maintaining safe spaces is critical to the work of the Pride Centre. Kowalchuck stated one of the ways to connect is *"meeting folks where they're at and letting them come to you."* Kowalchuck identified this as a way to create connections, relationships, and in turn, safe spaces.

Kowalchuck discussed the strengths and community impacts of the Pride Centre of Edmonton include "giving people the opportunity to meet other people like them. It creates an avenue for representation that they don't get to see anywhere else." Kowalchuck continued by identifying how the Pride Centre of Edmonton fosters relationships and connections that "open a lot of doors for people in terms of support." She acknowledged that "some people may come in for one thing and then find resources for other things, too." In some cases, Kowalchuck stated, "[the Pride Centre of Edmonton] is the first time they have friends and [experience] other big moments where people feel safe enough to take that first step."

Part of this work includes accessible resources; Kowalchuck acknowledged that online programming provided opportunities to reach a broader audience, but also stressed the importance of creating resources in multiple languages. Kowalchuck stated that community safety goes beyond the Pride Centre of Edmonton and needs to include gender affirming care in healthcare settings, which is something that continues to be a barrier for many folks.

Neurodiversity and Mental Wellness

An intersection that was identified by Kowalchuck was neurodiversity and the 2SLGBTQIA+ community; she has noticed that neuro-diverse folks have been connecting and utilizing her Youth Programming. Unfortunately, Kowalchuck stated, "there aren't a lot of resources for folks who are neuro-diverse and queer. So, if you are a youth looking for support, you can find some general stuff, but there isn't really anything specific" to the intersections of neurodiversity and queer.

When asked what Edmonton as a broad community could do to better support folks who are neuro-diverse, Kowalchuck advocated for "more conversations around accessibility and sensory issues. As an example, we bought

weighted blankets and fidget toys for the office. We got them for the youth, but everyone has been enjoying them, too." Kowalchuck shared the Pride Centre of Edmonton has a 'Stoplight System,' where they use coloured nametags to signify how much interaction a client wants that day. A yellow sticker indicates some communication is alright, whereas red is a signal that the person would like to be left alone at that time. This allows people to engage in social spaces and communicate what they are wanting without having to verbally state it. Kowalchuck discussed other ways of creating safe and inclusive spaces for neuro-diverse folks, including reaching out and collaborating with other organizations, and creating partnerships and relationships.

When it comes to mental wellness, Kowalchuck stated that mental wellness is complicated, it has a wide spectrum and intersects with broader community challenges. Kowalchuck provided an example where "you are more mentally well if you have economic stability, but if you're struggling because you've come out as trans, and your employer fired you," this can affect a person's mental health. The Pride Centre of Edmonton can and does offer support, but there are wider systemic issues within society that compound the challenges experienced by 2SLGBTQIA+ folks. Further, to obtain mental health support, Kowalchuk explained how engaging with resources such as Access 24/7 can be frustrating when gender-affirming language, is not used. When asked about Briteline, a new 2SLGBTQIA+ support line, Kowalchuck stated that she wished there were "more things like that, it's really great and it's something that we've needed for a long time and it's amazing that it's local to this province."

How can the broader community better support 2SLGBTQIA+ folks and create safer spaces?

We asked Kowalchuck how the broader community can support 2SLGBTQIA+ youth who may not be able to get to the Pride Centre or perhaps cannot join in virtual sessions due to barriers they may be experiencing; Kowalchuck identified that "*I connect with a lot of teachers or youth workers that ask "what can I do" – pronoun pins, posters of pride flags, literally wearing things that say you're a safe human. That you're somebody that they can potentially approach. It's on their terms, but you're still gently guiding them*."

Another avenue of support for 2SLGBTQIA+ folks is to remove assumptions; Kowalchuck stated that "people know themselves best and that you can't assume – wherever you come from, meet people where they're at." Moreover, Kowalchuk stated that it is "the little 'big things that you can do anywhere to make a difference and impact." When it comes to youth specifically Kowalchuck says, "let the youth be the expert because they are!" This includes thanking folks when they correct you on their pronouns; it requires safety and courage for one to do so, and those acts should be recognized. Lastly, participating in Safer Spaces training, expanding and supporting GSAs, and more broadly, promoting a gender inclusive world are among other ways to support 2SLGBTQIA+ folks and foster safety in all communities.

How else can you support The Pride Centre of Edmonton and the work they are doing?

Chek out their resource page and resources for parents.

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Seek to Understand: An Interview with Tricia Smith, Executive Director Boyle McCauley Health Centre

Written by Amanda Labonte

The Boyle McCauley Health Centre is a non-profit Community Health Centre that provides quality person-centred care to some of Edmonton's most vulnerable citizens. (1) Their supervised consumption site is one small, but essential component of the work done at the centre.

We often hear stories about the danger having supervised consumption sites pose to our communities, but people using supervised consumption sites are community members too and they should have access to safe spaces.

In the first 3 months of 2022 alone, 148 people have died from opioid poisoning in Edmonton, an average rate of 55.4 people per 100,000 population, and supervised consumption sites were used 9,807 times by 447 unique visitors. (2) Data from the fourth quarter of last year shows that 59% of opioid poisoning deaths occurred in a private residence while 23% happened in public. People are dying when they are away from services. Further, while adverse events do occur in supervised consumption sites, staff are present to immediately respond. There have been no deaths in the Boyle McCauley Health Centre supervised consumption site since it opened (T. Smith, personal communication, June 25, 2022).

We spoke with Tricia Smith, Executive Director of Boyle McCauley Health Centre to better understand the work being done at the organization.

There is this stigma about people who use substances as being dangerous to the community, what would you say to that?

I guess I would say that you know there are certainly individuals that use drugs that do some dangerous things, but I would say largely individuals who use drugs are dealing with the impacts of traumatic events that have happened to them in their lives and they're trying to get through their day like the rest of us. *What they want most is to be treated with humanity and respect and when we do that, we often receive it back.*

IN THE FIRST 3 MONTHS OF 2022

148

PEOPLE HAVE DIED FROM OPIOD POISONING IN EDMONTON

I think in any segment of the population there are individuals who act dangerously, do dangerous things, or are disrespectful to others. I think it's easy to pick out this particular population because of the stigma that goes with using drugs. It is not true that every person who uses drugs is a violent criminal.

I would also say that there's people in the general population that probably walk among you that you may not even know that use drugs. That's the thing that many people don't know or don't appreciate or don't understand is that drug use isn't just an inner-city issue, it's not an individual experiencing homelessness issue. Stigma paints all people who use drugs with the same brush and creates barriers to services and support.

There is further stigma that supervised consumption sites increase violence and crime in the neighbourhoods they are located in. What would you say to that?

I think a lot of it is just education and seeking to understand because the supervised consumption sites are there so that individuals can come to a space and use more safely, using safe clean sterile equipment to use drugs. The reason for that is to help them be more safe and to reduce their harms.

Sometimes that can be seen to be contributing to needles being in the community. I would say the needles were in the community before, but we're providing a space for them to come to use more safely, to reduce their harm, and hopefully, when they use in this space they dispose of their equipment here.

Part of the reason we put a supervised consumption site where we did is because the use was already happening in the community, and we just wanted it to happen in a safer way. Now we can more easily respond to emergencies if an individual has an adverse effect to the substance they're using and provide a space for them to dispose of their used needles. I would also agree that we should continue to work with community partners and residents to maintain a safe community.

How does having the Boyle McCauley Health Centre as an accessible resource impact the people you serve?

Boyle McCauley Health Centre has been operating for over 40 years and in the last probably 25 has really evolved to have the mission and mandate to serve the population that is most vulnerable. Those with barriers to accessing health care in traditional ways for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is addictions, as well as severe and persistent mental health challenges, often the complex health conditions and behaviors that come with that, get them excluded from other community clinics. Serving that segment of the population is the reason that Boyle McCauley Health Centre exists. We do it extremely well because *we treat them like human beings with respect*. We acknowledge the challenges that those individuals are experiencing and take a trauma-informed approach to meeting their needs from their perspective.

That has led to individuals then wanting to use our supervised consumption site. They're coming to a space where there's staff and individuals that they already trust, and feel are going to take care of them and treat them with respect. When you add that supervised consumption site now, you're integrated into a health system that was already in existence.

There are some people who aren't our paneled patients that do use our supervised consumption site but probably a good majority are accessing both [supervised consumption and health care]. If they're coming to use the supervised consumption site and aren't a panel patient, that is part of the work that we try and do with them. If they don't already have a [health care] provider, then we can provide that connection to broader health services beyond the supervised consumption site.

How does Boyle McCauley Health Centre create or contribute to community connection?

We're looking at all our program operations now with some of the public health restrictions being lifted, while the operating models were impacted by the pandemic, some of our programs are:

Kindred House

A space for women and trans women who are involved in the street-based sex trade. The goal of that program is to provide a safe space. We started doing a little bit of trauma counseling as part of it but it's a space for those women to gather in a community of like individuals experiencing like challenges to be supported, have a warm meal, and sometimes just sit and watch soap operas together.

It's a space for them to go to be safe and be off the streets during the day, it's a daytime program.

HAART House

Is one space where the community is definitely important and contributes to wellbeing. It is a similar type of space but for a very different purpose. It's for individuals who are HIV positive or Hep C positive, and it was started as a way to help individuals manage their daily meds. When HIV meds started you needed to take them with food. If you're experiencing homelessness and have trouble accessing food, it's also then going to be hard for you to take your medications properly and sometimes regularly and there's just difficulties with keeping those medications with you when you are experiencing homelessness.

Again, a daytime space for individuals with like challenges and stigmas to come to have support, get a warm meal, take their medications, and sit together in a safe space where they aren't being judged.

Pregnancy Pathways Program

Is a supported housing program, where we support women who are pregnant and experiencing homelessness. We bring them into the program, focusing on harm reduction principles, with a goal to help them have a healthier pregnancy so they can have a healthier baby and then make informed educated choices about their children after birth. While they live independently in their own apartments it's all in one building, or in a building close by. This creates easier opportunities for them to come together as a community of women to share meals or do a little cooking class or take a parenting class.

What is one message you would want people to take away from the work being done at the Boyle McCauley Health Centre?

I think for me my biggest message to anyone and even to my friends and family when I talk about the work that we do, I would say seek to understand. Talk to the people that work here. They are amazing people, and many have worked here for years. They do really difficult work on a day-to-day basis, and they continue to do that work because it's so rewarding and because they're dedicated to this population. So, my biggest message to anyone is *seek to understand*.

To learn more about The Boyle McCauley Health Centre or the programs they offer, please visit their website.

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School Resource Officers: Changing Perspectives

Written by Sydney Sheloff

What are School Resource Officers?

School Resource Officers (SROs) are, basically, police officers who work within schools. They are tasked with the responsibility to ensure school safety, collaborate with community organizations to support youth, educate youth about issues surrounding crime, and divert youth from the criminal justice system (Edmonton Police Service, 2019). SROs are seen as a form of community policing, which is defined as "a shift from traditional policing and focused on building trust and long-term relationships in the community with the goal of reducing crime. It moves from a punitive focus to one based on prevention through mutual respect" (Mohammed & De Costa, 2021). As of May 2020, there were 26 SROs across Edmonton Public and Catholic High School and Junior High Schools (Mohammed & De Costa, 2021).

What is the debate?

There has been much debate over the actual function of SROs within schools. The Edmonton Police Service claims SROs divert youth away from the criminal justice system (2019), but SROs are themselves part of the criminal justice system. Youth are regularly watched and disciplined by police officers. Misbehaviors and minor behavioral issues that would have previously been addressed by school authorities such as principles or teachers are now being addressed by police, sometimes resulting in a criminal charge (Bernard & Smith, 2018; Police Free Schools Winnipeg, 2020).

Some Edmonton students have claimed that officers do not view students as students, but as potential threats and criminals (CBC News, 2020). Studies from across Canada (Chadha, Herbert, & Richard, 2020; Police Free Schools Winnipeg, 2020) have found that many students feel watched, targeted, and even harassed by SROs, making youth feel uncomfortable and scared in their schools. These youth did not feel protected by police, they felt like suspects being watched. Police-Free Schools Winnipeg (2020) shared stories of students who had skipped class because they felt too anxious around SROs, which affects their ability to do well in school.

Widespread stereotypes that Black and Indigenous people are violent or dangerous may lead SROs to perceive these students in negative ways. Students in Edmonton have

claimed that SROs target Black, Brown, and Indigenous students (CBC News, 2020). Police-Free Schools Winnipeg (2020) has also shared stories of students who believe BIPOC students are targeted by SROs.

SROs are also tasked with offering counselling and support to students (Edmonton Police Service, 2019), but these services would be much better performed by other professionals, such as social workers and psychologists (Mallet, 2015). Youth who have trouble in school are not going to certified counsellors or mental health professionals to deal with their problems, they are going to police who have little to no training in this specific context (Abela & DonLevy, 2020). Furthermore, as illustrated above, many students feel targeted by SROs and do not trust or feel safe around them, so it is unlikely that they would go to them for support.

What is happening in Edmonton/History of SRO decisions?

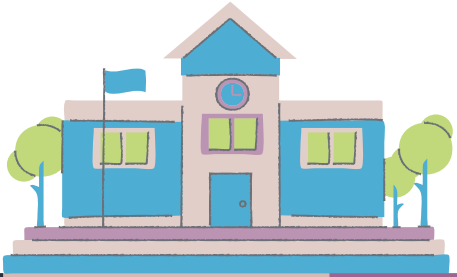
School boards in Edmonton have been investigating whether or not they should continue to have SROs in their schools. Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) decided to suspend its SRO program in September 2020 as they review the program. Edmonton Catholic School District (ECSD) also decided to review the program, although they did not suspend the program. These reviews mark the first time the SRO program has been reviewed since its inception in 1979.

In June 2022, ECSD released the report they commissioned on the SRO program, along with the news that they will be continuing the program. *This review did not investigate the effectiveness of the program, but rather, experiences of and opinions about the program.* The researchers found that the vast majority of students, parents, and teachers, regardless of race, supported continuing the program. However, many of the parents had little knowledge about the program and did not know if it was having a positive impact or not (Oriola, 2022; Wortly, Bucerius, & Samuels, 2022). As Oriola argues, a program being popular does not mean it is not harmless (Oriloa, 2022).

The report found that SROs reported they did not have a clear job description. While the authors of the report conclude this means SROs can be more flexible in their roles, this finding backs up previous research that states SROs are not given the tools to work in the unique context of a school. Furthermore, the authors state only a minority of students reported feeling targeted by SROs, but Black and Indigenous students (20%) were almost twice as likely to say so compared to white students (11.5%) (Wortly, Bucerius, & Samuels, 2022; Junker, 2022). Data revealed 2,295 "SRO-involved incidents" within the study period of 2010-2021. The report found that criminal charges were filed anywhere from 5.3% - 16.2% of incidents, depending on the type of incident (Oriola, 2022).

Independent researchers have been investigating the SRO program as well. Dr. Alexandre Da Costa and Bashir Mohamed created the "Edmonton SRO research project," in which they looked at data related to the SRO program they received through a FOIP request directly from the police. From this research they found that between the years 2011-2021: School Resource Officers issued 2,068 criminal charges, 679 students were expelled with SRO involvement, 5,228 students were suspended with SRO involvement, and 20,963 students were labelled as "offenders." (Mohamed & De Costa, 2021).

The Edmonton Public Schools review is set to be released in November of this year.



A drawback of both these studies is that the data available to them is not disaggregated by race – therefore the researchers cannot substantiate the claim that the SRO program is disproportionately impacting BIPOC students. However, these studies are showing that a substantial number of youths are being criminally charged in their schools (Mohammed & De Costa, 2021). Charging children is part of a process called the school-to-prison pipeline. Getting involved in the criminal justice system at such a young age increases the chances that these youth will face more criminalization as they age (Mallet, 2015). Youth need support to deal with the challenges they face, not charges.

While Edmonton Catholic claims there is limited evidence to support scrapping the program, by that same token, there is limited evidence to support keeping it. The authors themselves stated the report could not evaluate the effectiveness of the program. The authors further argue that

> *a decision to terminate the program would have to be justified by the presence of a relatively small number of community members who feel that the program criminalizes and intimidates students, is biased against minorities, and costs too much (Wortly, Bucerius, & Samuels, 2022, p.60).*

The experiences of that "relatively small" group matter. We need to prioritize the perspectives of youth who are most impacted by the program – the ones who feel watched, are disciplined, and are charged. Furthermore, there is an essential need for data disaggregated by race in order to show the impact this program has on different groups of students.

Any decision to maintain, reform, or abolish the School Resource Officer program needs to be based on sound data and transparency. The absence of formal reviews for multiple decades means we don't have that data and has only exacerbated the long list of concerns that critics of the program have. *All students – particularly those who are marginalized – deserve to feel safe in their schools.* With testimonies of harm perpetuated towards racialized students, it is clear that a lot of work needs to be done to address and repair the damage going forward.

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Would you or your agency like to get involved in Community Matters?

There are multiple ways that you or your organization can contribute to our upcoming publications in September and December. Our planning for the September edition will be starting soon!

For more information or to express your interest please contact:
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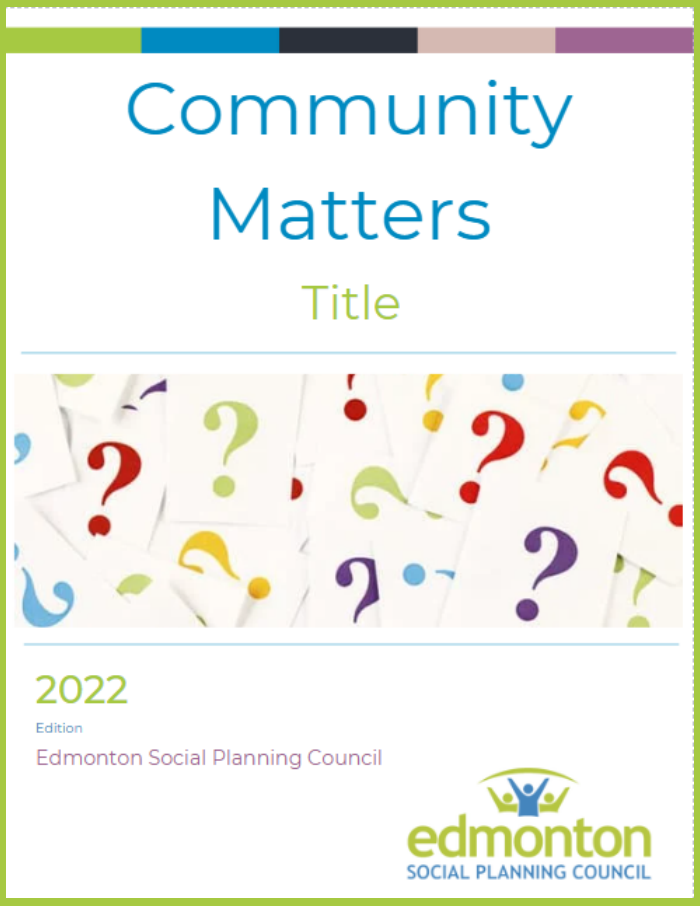


The Edmonton Indigenous Court: Creating Safety in New Spaces

Written by Jenna Robinson

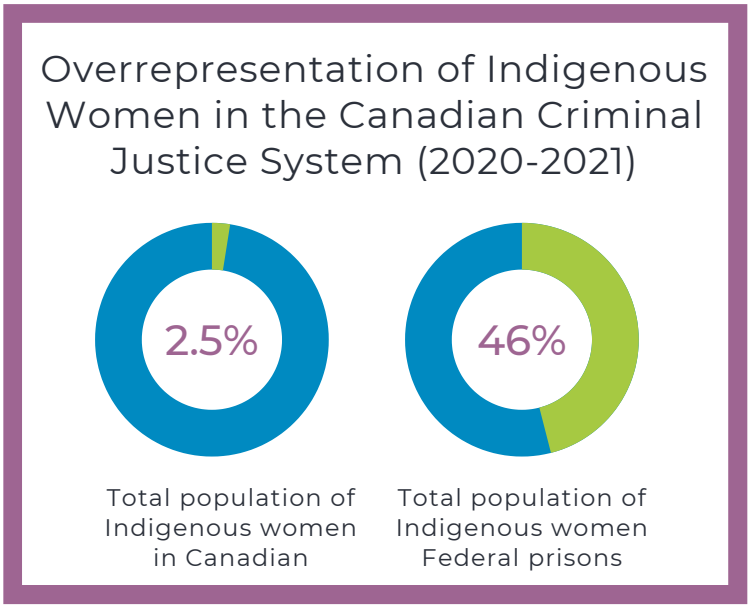
When reflecting on community safety, one may think folks who are criminalized are a threat, but they deserve to feel safe just as much as every other member of the community. Although some may assume "criminals" simply choose to engage in crime, systemic factors significantly contribute to a person's contact with the criminal justice system. Experiences of homelessness, poverty, intimate partner violence, and mental health challenges are among the factors that influence the likelihood of judicial system contact. Moreover, colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and violence experienced by Indigenous Peoples have resulted in their significant overrepresentation (and criminalization) in the Canadian criminal justice system. (2) As a result, it is very likely that Indigenous Peoples in Canada feel unsafe in certain communities, particularly in their interactions with the criminal justice system, due to the characteristics of the system.

Recently the Edmonton Indigenous Court was established as a response to the overrepresentation and negative experiences, with the objective of increasing feelings of safety among the Indigenous community.

The Overrepresentation of Indigenous Women in the Criminal Justice System

The overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples within the criminal justice system is not a new situation and the rate of Indigenous women incarcerated continues to increase. (2; 3; 4; 5; 6) In 2016, Indigenous women represented 2.5% of the Canadian population (7) but represented 43% of the federally sentenced female population in 2020-2021, which is an increase of 73.8% over the last 30 years. (5) Indigenous women are also overrepresented in multiple aspects of the prison system, including being assessed as high-risk and more frequently designated as in need of maximum security.

The National Inquiry for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) connects the criminalization and incarceration of Indigenous women to the victimization and violence they experience(d). (4) This report outlines how the criminal justice system, particularly the prison system, perpetuates and creates new forms of violence that many Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people experience. Moreover, they argue that incarceration among this population is often a response to experiences of



violence. Examples include government-led loss of identity, the Sixties Scoop, Residential Schools, the apprehension of their children by the state, human trafficking, and forced sterilization. Considering this information, one could conclude that Indigenous women do not feel safe within the criminal justice system.

The criminal justice system is adversarial and offender-focused, meaning that it is heavily focused on *punishment*. (3) It relies on the court system as the route to "justice" and sanctions are often financial fines or periods of incarceration. Within the formal criminal justice system, there is very little, if any, acknowledgment of harm that has been experienced by the community or victim(s). The system explicitly contrasts Indigenous knowledge, as Indigenous Peoples emphasize the collective and inclusion of many members.

The Edmonton Indigenous Court

In response to the unique needs and experiences of Indigenous Peoples and women, Edmonton court representatives worked collaboratively with community service providers, including Indigenous Elders and community organizations to establish the Edmonton Indigenous Court (EIC) in February of 2022. The EIC stems from a long history of advocacy by Indigenous communities and representatives who sought the inclusion of restorative justice principles in the criminal justice system. Restorative justice is a non-adversarial and non-retributive alternative that can be used when responding to crime. (3) This process requires additional members to be present (e.g. Victims, Restorative Justice Peacemakers, Indigenous Community Support Agencies, etc.) during mediation, resulting in a collective response to harm instead of an individual response. (1) Rather than focusing strictly on the offender, this response views crime as *harm impacted on people and relationships.*

The EIC's vision statement identifies that it will provide a "culturally relevant, restorative, and holistic system of justice for Indigenous individuals, including offenders, victims, and the community harmed by an offender's actions, that addresses the unique challenges and circumstances of the Indigenous People[s]." (1, pg. 3) The EIC must consider the impact of sexualized violence, for example, on Indigenous women when hearing their matters in court and during sentencing hearings. This must be done in pursuit of 'justice' and to decrease the rate of Indigenous women in the criminal justice system. The Court has recognized that it serves "people who have different cultural traditions and who come from different ancestral territories", implying that their response to crime must mimic that. (1)

This addresses the National Inquiry for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls findings identified above, by creating a culturally relevant space that aims to reduce and acknowledge harm experienced within and outside of the mainstream criminal justice system.

An example of the Court's implementation of Indigenous cultural traditions within the EIC is a pipe ceremony that was conducted by an Elder from Treaty 6 and an Elder from Native Counselling Services of Alberta, who blessed the Eagle Staff that will sit in the Courtroom when it is in session. (1) Other principles that have been implemented in the EIC include (but are not limited to) Indigenous Judges or those experienced in Indigenous Restorative Justice, and in some cases, a Healing Plan specific to the participant. The EIC sits once a week and begins with an opening prayer and a Smudge ceremony by an Elder.

Safety for Indigenous Women within the Criminal Justice System

Assistant Chief Judge R. K. Bodnarek has recognized that the establishment of the EIC is a "necessary and substantive step forward in implementing the recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as well as the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls National Inquiry (MMIWG) report." (1, pg. 2) It is critical that all of those who reside in Amiskwaciy Waskahikan (Edmonton), particularly Indigenous women, feel safe. Although there is a long history of government-led violence towards Indigenous women in Canada, the establishment of the EIC and its collaboration with Indigenous knowledge signals hope for eliminating the overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples in the criminal justice system.

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Food as a Method to Community Connection and Community Safety

Written by Amanda Labonte

Food is a human right. (1) Food not only nourishes our bodies but contributes to overall health and wellness. Historically food has connected people. Where there is a connection there is understanding and empathy, and where there is understanding and empathy there is safety. Food can be a method for creating community safety, through the power of connection.

Food insecurity continues to be a pervasive issue within Edmonton. Food insecurity not only prevents people from accessing a basic need, but further denies people access to healthy relationships and community engagement.

The Edmonton Food Bank reported in their 2021 annual report that an average of 25,801 people were helped, and 65 hampers were distributed *each month*. (2) This does not include people who borrowed from family members or friends, accessed other short-term support from other agencies in the community, or went without food. Nor does this measure people who could access food, but for whom nutrient-rich foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, were out of reach. Also, this does not factor in people who could access some food, but not necessarily culturally appropriate foods. These are all factors that contribute to food insecurity.

"When a person does not have access to food they feel shame, alienation and even inequalities. They feel powerless over their food choices." (3)

The shame associated with being food insecure negatively impacts people's connection to the community and leads to social exclusion. (4) There are long-held discriminatory perspectives that people who access food support are somehow abusing the system, taking

Figure 1: Food Insecurity

advantage, or need to be 'deserving' of the support. The reality is food insecurity can happen to any of us at any time. It can be happening to your neighbours, co-workers, family members, friends or, even yourself.

Canada's Food Guide recommends eating with others, even outside of special occasions to connect and contribute to healthier eating habits, including taking time with a meal. (5)

Food contributes to how we interact with others (6) and eating together makes us more trusting of others, we feel happier and overall, more satisfied. (7) Sharing food and eating together as a community contributes to the general well-being of the community (7) as well as encourages community engagement by all members. (8) Sharing a meal opens doorways for people to share stories, connect and recognize the value of all members of the community.

"Food is a basic survival need, so sharing food, on a primal level, is the most powerful act of care imaginable." (6)

Food can be a connector or a potential catalyst to greater things in the community. The real work comes in the social connection sharing a meal or a gathering can create. When we connect with members in our community, we learn to see their strengths, contributions, and creativity. We learn we have more in common than we thought.

When community members connect with others, we learn. This is how we can create safety through food, the more communities connect and are inclusive, the more we can understand, empathize and care about one another.

Recently, there are projects in Canada focused on food as a way to connect communities. The Nanaimo 'Come to the Table' project was launched as a way for neighbours to meet informally over shared meals with the intention of creating relationships. (9) In Ontario, the Genwell Project is an initiative connecting people socially, a BBQ was held and food was served to create connection. (10) The Genwell Project is rooted in, "the belief that strong relationships equal strong communities, which have the assets, skills, and connections to help the most vulnerable, build on what's already strong and ward off some of the most wicked problems." (10) Results from the social connection survey, a key component of the Genwell Project, found that people who were isolated experienced poor mental and physical

Figure 2: Food as a Method to Community Safety

health, while those who connected with five or more people a week, neighbours included, experienced greater happiness and life satisfaction. (11)

In the Edmonton area, Stony Plain and St. Albert both have neighbourhood connection initiatives that look at the importance of inclusion, connection, and relationship as ways to foster stronger collective neighbourhoods, and St. Albert includes how this contributes to personal safety (12, 13). Municipalities in the Edmonton area are recognizing the importance of connection in creating strong, safe communities. One way to achieve this is through sharing a meal with other community members.

What Can you Do?

Get to know your neighbours, host a community BBQ or a shared recipe night. Create an online food share group. Host a weekly or monthly neighbourhood potluck or sponsored meal. Make the events accessible, inexpensive, or free. *Invite everyone, every time.* Most importantly, use food as a tool for conversation and connection.

There are several grants in the Edmonton area that your neighbourhood can apply for to support community connection events.

Edmonton
Neighbourhood Connections Grant

Stony Plain
Neighbourhood Connector

Strathcona County
Strathcona County Community Connection Grant

St. Albert
Block Party

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