

Mapping Indigenous Youth Services in Ottawa

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THE MAPPING INDIGENOUS YOUTH SERVICES PROJECT began due to the alarming rate of crises experienced by Indigenous youth in Ottawa lacking vital support. The grassroots Indigenous youth-led and youth-driven non-profit organization, *Assembly of Seven Generations* (A7G), often intervenes to provide essential services while having no access to program funding or dollars. Guided by traditional knowledge and Elders, A7G provides support and empowerment programs/policies for Indigenous youth to do cultural wellness reclamation. A7G programs have seen youth facing crises such as homelessness, addiction, pregnancy, sexual assault, challenges with staying in school, mental illness, and suicide, due to inter-generational trauma and systemic racism.

While these issues are rampant, resources to support youth in these crises are often so problematic they are unfit for youth to access or they are non-existent.

Utilizing research ethics from *Indigenous Youth Voices: A Way Forward in Conducting Research with and by Indigenous Youth*, five Indigenous youth undertook the following:

- led a focus group with other Indigenous youth;
- sent out calls to service providers for information on their services;
- conducted an environmental scan of all services listed for Indigenous youth or any youth in the Ottawa area; and,
- did a literature review of important Indigenous youth-led reports which then informed a database and interactive map as part of the report.

The database and interactive map will be hosted and kept up to date by A7G. The services listed in the database and interactive map include housing, health, culture, employment/skills and education. Best practices and inclusive services identified and recommended by Indigenous youth are amplified and highlighted in the report and interactive map. The interactive map which identified all of the database information and recommended services are listed [here](#).

Unfortunately, although Indigenous youth service providers of Ottawa were invited to the focus group, none attended. Many features of these services proved to be non-existent upon attempts to access them.

Many service providers have “dead links” on their websites or require a user to fill out a contact form with no access to staff contact lists. Some services are only accessible through referrals from other service providers or formal institutions such as schools, probation officers or hospitals. The services are almost always palliative rather than preventative.

“Some youth felt that trying to access services was like a full-time job.”

Other major barriers identified by the youth were:

- Service providers and staff who are ignorant to Indigenous histories and realities, which result in inappropriate behaviour and comments when serving Indigenous youth
- Majority of services were located in downtown Ottawa or in Vanier making it very challenging for youth living further east, south or west within the city to access services
- Of the services providers listed in the database and interactive map, Indigenous youth only recommended 16 of these services.

It is very evident that the services and options available are very limited and in addition, there is a need to support Indigenous youth in finding appropriate and adequate services in a formal way. Indigenous youth in Ottawa would often stumble upon services or would fortunately find services due to an auntie, uncle or auntie type figure in their life.

The well-being of Indigenous youth should not be reliant on luck or chance. There has to be dependable and accessible ways for Indigenous youth to navigate the various systems in place.

Some of the recommendations that were specific to the Ottawa area include:

1. The creation of an Indigenous youth-led Service Navigator and Service Navigator Think Tank
2. Systemic cross-sectoral changes that take the lead of Indigenous youth to determine their own solutions
3. Cultural competency training for all service providers and their staff to better serve Indigenous communities and youth

Lastly, knowing that there are gaps in services for Indigenous youth is not enough, we must act and report on these gaps. We can do so by requesting services needed for First Nations youth through **Jordan's Principle** and by continuing to advocate for equitable and non-discriminatory services for all Indigenous youth.