

Annual Report to Parliament

2021



Indigenous Services
Canada

Services aux
Autochtones Canada

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Message from the Minister



This past year has been a very difficult one for many people and communities. The COVID-19 pandemic, the recent findings of unmarked graves at former residential schools, and the unacceptable deaths of Joyce Echaquan and Chantal Moore have shaken Canada. They have demonstrated a clear need for us to act quickly to address systemic anti-Indigenous racism and discrimination, confront the historic wrongs of the past and present, and leap forward in our work to ensure a more just society that is fair and equitable for everyone.

This past year has also shown us new ways of working together. Our government and the department of Indigenous Services Canada continue to work with Indigenous partners on our shared priorities. These include protecting each other from COVID-19, closing the socioeconomic gaps between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people in Canada, and supporting Indigenous Peoples in assuming control of the delivery of services at the pace and in the ways they choose.

This report provides an overview of that work.

COVID-19 support measures

Throughout the pandemic, we have worked with Indigenous partners to ensure that First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities, businesses and organizations have sufficient and tailored support.

As a fundamental first step, we have worked with First Nations to support essential health measures such as the distribution of personal protective equipment and the deployment of additional health personnel, supplementing the existing workforce in communities. We have also worked closely with many Indigenous partners to support the vaccine rollout across the country.

We have provided flexible funding through initiatives such as the Indigenous Community Support Fund, which supports Indigenous-led solutions to prevent, prepare for and respond to COVID-19. Specific support has also been offered in other key service areas, such as for education and the safe reopening of schools, for mental health, for interest-free loans and non-repayable contributions to help small and medium-sized Indigenous businesses, and for the adaptation of on-reserve community infrastructure. Canada's COVID-19 Economic Response Plan has also offered individual and business supports.

As we look toward recovery, we will move forward with the work outlined in the Building Back Better COVID-19 Recovery Strategy, which will help make Canada a more inclusive place for Indigenous Peoples.

Shared priorities

While working to protect communities from COVID-19, ISC has continued its core work to close socioeconomic gaps and advance Indigenous self-determination.

We continue to work with communities on important issues such as improving community infrastructure. This includes our commitment to ensuring all First Nations have access to clean drinking water and to supporting adequate, safe and affordable housing on reserves.

We continue to address systemic issues that pose risks to our work to close socioeconomic gaps. I am determined to continue the essential work of ending anti-Indigenous racism and discrimination in healthcare systems. This work must ensure that Indigenous Peoples receive safe and respectful care. It is their right, as it is for all Canadians.

We continually look to our partners to see if our work is on the right track. The Inuit–Crown Partnership Committee's Joint Progress Report highlighted a range of other joint efforts we have accomplished together, and we are making progress in our work with the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami toward the joint commitment of eliminating tuberculosis across Inuit Nunangat by 2030.

In some of our key service areas, we have begun work on transferring programs to Indigenous control. Although service transfer takes time, we can see progress. For example, the department is engaged with First Nations at regional technical tables, with self-governing First Nations at joint implementation tables, and with partners such as the Assembly of First Nations to advance First Nations priorities in elementary and secondary education on reserves. We are already seeing results from this process, such as new interim funding formulae and Regional Education Agreements for elementary and secondary education that provide predictable funding that responds to the unique needs of First Nations communities. Language and cultural programming, along with full-day kindergarten for children ages 4 and 5, have also been incorporated.

Another example of transformation is the transfer of management of the Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program, which has been passed from the federal government to the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association and Métis Capital Corporations. This program promotes entrepreneurship in Indigenous communities and seeks to increase the number of viable Indigenous-owned businesses.

While this year has been challenging, I am encouraged by the progress. I look forward to continuing to work with Indigenous partners to support Indigenous self-determination, and the well-being and economic prosperity of all Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

The work of decolonization and self-determination needs our commitment and focus: to new ways, to equity in funding and opportunity, and to a vision of a healthy future for all children in this country. Our government remains committed to doing this work together.

The Honourable Patty Hajdu
Minister of Indigenous Services

Introduction

The [Department of Indigenous Services Act](#) came into force on July 15, 2019. The Act officially establishes the department of Indigenous Services Canada and its mandate to improve access to high quality services for First Nations, Inuit and the Métis Nation. The vision is to support and empower Indigenous Peoples to deliver services and address the socio-economic conditions in their communities.¹

The Act also outlines the department's legislated mandate to report on an annual basis to Parliament on, *“(a) the socio-economic gaps between First Nations individuals, Inuit, Métis individuals and other Canadians and the measures taken by the Department to reduce those gaps; and (b) the progress made towards the transfer of departmental responsibilities [to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis governments and organizations.]”*

This document is Indigenous Services Canada's second Annual Report to Parliament and is different from its predecessor. Last year's report relied primarily on the 2016 Census to establish baseline data on socio-economic gaps. This report builds on our understanding of those gaps and focuses on the department's actions to close those gaps through quality services and increased resources. It considers how the impacts of COVID-19 and the department's response have affected those gaps and finally it highlights the progress towards the gradual transfer of departmental responsibilities to Indigenous governments and organizations. However, this report is not intended to provide a comprehensive review of the department's progress in relation to its spending. That information is readily available through the Departmental Results Report and the Departmental Results Framework, which are available [here](#).

It should also be noted that while this report is externally focused, the department understands the need to align its internal organizational culture, systems and processes to support this mandate. On March 4, 2020, Indigenous Services Canada launched its internal [Strategic Plan](#) (2020-2025). Based on extensive engagement with employees and partners across the country, the plan serves as a roadmap for change and as a guide for the department in achieving its legislative mandate.

This report is organized into four parts:

Part One focuses on the steps that Indigenous Services Canada has taken to address specific socio-economic gaps through increased access and better quality services for Indigenous Peoples in Canada. This section highlights the department's roles and responsibilities in service delivery; the key factors affecting service delivery; the effect that COVID-19 had on socio-economic gaps and the department's response; and the effectiveness of community-led approaches.

Part Two provides examples of how the department has been working with Indigenous partners to advance the gradual process of transferring responsibilities to Indigenous organizations. It highlights how this is a fundamental change to how the department works to meet the needs of Indigenous Peoples; outlines how transfer to Indigenous-led

organizations is key to closing socio-economic gaps; discusses the diversity of approaches to transfer; and outlines how the department will continue to work with partners to meet this objective.

Part Three discusses gaps in the collection and availability of Indigenous data. It acknowledges data gaps and their impact on the ability to monitor progress; outlines steps to address these gaps in the short and long term; and outlines several co-developed initiatives for advancing Indigenous data capacity.

Part Four is a statistical look at the impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous communities. The pandemic has been the most significant public health crisis of the last century and has had a profound effect on Canadian society. This part of the report breaks down the impacts of the pandemic on the Indigenous population based on COVID-19 data on physical and mental health; economic indicators; education; safety and social impacts.

A Note on Terminology

The department acknowledges that the use of some terms in this document may be problematic for some. While the language in Canada used to describe and speak about Indigenous Peoples is evolving to be more reflective of how Indigenous Peoples and communities choose to identify themselves, there remain some pieces of legislation that continue to use outdated and colonial terminology.

For example, Canada's *Constitution Act, 1982* recognizes three distinct "aboriginal peoples of Canada" – "Indian, Inuit, and Métis." The Government of Canada now uses the terms "Indigenous" and "First Nations," however, "Aboriginal" and "Indian" remain the legal terms that continue to be used in certain circumstances. As the [*Indian Act*](#), a very outdated and colonial piece of legislation, continues to be in effect, terms like "registered Indian" or "status Indian" remain in use. Given that these remain accepted legal terms, where the report requires reference to the *Indian Act* and its provisions, these legal terms will be used.

It is also important to note that this report uses "Indigenous organizations" to describe the entities to which responsibility for service delivery is being transferred. This term is reflective of the language used in the *Department of Indigenous Services Act* and is intended to cover a wide range of entities that have representative authority and may take responsibility for the delivery of services, including Indigenous governments, authorities, institutions, and organizations, as determined with Indigenous partners.

Finally, it must be noted that ISC's terminology is evolving in collaboration with Indigenous partners. For example, under the 2017 Canada-Métis Nation Accord, terminology has evolved to include the use of the term "Métis Nation" in reference to Métis Peoples.

Part 1: Addressing Socio-economic Gaps Through Quality Services

Introduction

Social and economic factors, including health, education, income, employment and community infrastructure, are major determinants of well-being. These factors have effects at both the community and individual levels. By understanding the importance and impacts of these factors, and by working in partnership with the communities and peoples facing challenges, governments can design and deliver services to address disparities among populations. Indigenous leaders have also been clear that we must do more to close the fiscal gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples. Governments at all levels have an opportunity to take into account differing needs and conditions to seek substantive equality through policies and services.

For Indigenous individuals and communities in Canada, socio-economic outcomes have been affected by colonialization and displacement of cultural traditions. This includes the residential school legacy as well as legislation, policies and programs which persistently exclude First Nations, Inuit or Métis and are based in prejudice and systemic racism. As gaps have opened, widened and persisted due to years of inadequate services, the opportunities related to addressing colonial or discriminatory policies have increased. Indigenous Peoples in Canada have faced, and continue to face, significant gaps in the availability and accessibility of quality and culturally relevant services for their communities. As a result, Indigenous Peoples often experience poorer outcomes than non-Indigenous Canadians in areas ranging from lower incomes and education levels to chronic health conditions and life expectancy.

The federal government acknowledges that more investments are required to address the socio-economic gaps adequately. As we continue to strengthen the federal government's ability to report on the socioeconomic gaps, we commit to providing a more detailed aggregate breakdown of what the total funding gap is in future reports.

Many studies from Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners have tried to measure what the total funding gap is between Indigenous and non-Indigenous People in Canada. For example, the Government recognizes more investment is needed to address the gap in adequate housing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous People.

A recent Parliamentary Budget Office study showed a \$636 million annual shortfall in investments for adequate housing and shelter². Another Parliamentary Budget Office study highlighted a gap of \$138 million in funding (between 2017-2017 and 2026-2027) for Water and Waste Water management on-reserve and what is needed for overall operation and maintenance for those systems³. And the Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships released a study that found that First Nations face an overall infrastructure gap of roughly \$30 billion⁴. Finally, while the National Indigenous Economic Development Board's 2019 Economic Progress Report readily pointed out that while socio-economic gaps are closing between First Nations, Inuit, Métis and the rest of Canada, they are closing too slowly – and that more must be done to achieve parity.

Indigenous Services Canada has within its enabling legislation a mandate to advance substantive equality so that it:

- ensures that Indigenous individuals have access — in accordance with transparent service standards and the needs of each Indigenous group, community or people — to services;
- takes into account socio-economic gaps that persist between Indigenous individuals and other Canadians with respect to a range of matters as well as social factors having an impact on health and well-being⁵.

This section of the Report presents how Indigenous Services Canada is advancing its mandate to address socio-economics gaps through improved, quality services. The inaugural Annual Report to Parliament provided an extensive statistical summary of socio-economic gaps primarily based on Census data. These data are available every five years, and many of the gaps would only be expected to see movement over multiple years. This year's report makes reference to those baseline statistics but focuses on the department's actions to close those gaps through quality services. After an unprecedented year, the report also seeks to demonstrate how the department has responded in a manner that both acknowledges the unique challenges the pandemic poses to Indigenous communities and demonstrates a commitment to addressing disparities by supporting the leadership of Indigenous governments and organizations.

COVID-19 Pandemic Context

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous Services Canada's top priority has been the health and safety of Indigenous individuals. The department has listened to and heard from Indigenous leadership from across Canada that First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities are particularly more at-risk to the COVID-19 pandemic due to a range of social, environmental and economic factors. The pandemic has brought into sharp focus the existing inequities, social gaps and unique challenges that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis individuals, including those residing away from Indigenous communities, face on a regular basis. For instance, many Indigenous and northern communities have a higher prevalence of pre-existing health conditions and vulnerabilities as well as difficulties in accessing healthy food and health services. Some communities have outdated or inadequate internet services that are unable to accommodate remote learning, work or general communication requirements. Overcrowded living conditions have made it difficult to maintain a safe physical distance, thus increasing the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission. The pandemic has also highlighted a lack of adequate support programs for off-reserve and urban Indigenous Peoples. However the pandemic has also highlighted the leadership, determination, strength and tremendous resilience of Indigenous Peoples across the country. A detailed reporting of the effects of the pandemic on Indigenous Peoples in Canada is provided in Part four of this report.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, Indigenous leaders have worked diligently to prevent, limit and respond to the spread of the virus in their communities.

The Government of Canada worked directly with Indigenous leaders and communities to prepare for and respond to the novel coronavirus through increased funding to enhance physical and mental health services, emergency food security efforts and educational and economic relief. Indigenous leadership has also led the way through working with the Canadian Armed Forces on an unprecedented vaccination effort at the community level which has led to high levels of success in their campaigns. Urban Indigenous organizations have collaborated with each other, and with provincial health units across the country to ensure that vaccination clinics in major cities are culturally safe and accessible for First Nations, Inuit and Métis adults. The following pages of this Report present the many ways Indigenous Services Canada has sought to support Indigenous Peoples in their response to the pandemic and bolster existing federal programs for Indigenous Peoples.

There are many factors that influence how services are provided to Indigenous individuals, from a patchwork of overlapping jurisdictions, to the remote nature of many Indigenous communities, and differing costs of service provision. With this in mind, Indigenous Services Canada remains committed to working directly with Indigenous partners to incorporate Indigenous knowledge and culturally relevant concepts as the foundation for the design, development, and delivery of services for Indigenous individuals.

Health

Indigenous Peoples in Canada face all the same general health issues as the non-Indigenous population but also face a unique set of challenges when it comes to access to quality services and positive health outcomes. Longstanding geographical, systemic, and policy discrimination and racism have contributed to the socio-economic gaps between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous peoples when it comes to access to healthcare and overall health outcomes. For example, there is a significant life expectancy gap between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. In 2011, life expectancy of First Nations individuals was roughly nine years shorter compared to the non-Indigenous population. That number jumps to 11 years shorter among Inuit and is roughly five years among Métis individuals. Challenges faced by Indigenous communities have also been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indigenous Services Canada works with other federal departments and First Nation, Inuit, Métis Nation, provincial and territorial partners to support healthy Indigenous individuals, families and communities. Indigenous Services Canada strives to further improve Indigenous health outcomes, provide access to quality health services and support greater Indigenous control of the health system by supporting:

- Individuals and communities who are at a greater risk of and experiencing poorer health outcomes associated with chronic diseases, injuries and communicable diseases;
- Mental wellness supports, including culturally appropriate, community-based mental wellness services;

- Basic home and community care services, including for seniors, as well as work to support those living with disabilities, acute or chronic illnesses to receive care in-community and closer to home;
- Primary health care through nursing and oral health care services;
- Non-insured health benefits (e.g., prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications, dental and vision care, medical supplies and equipment, as well as mental health counselling and transportation to access health care services, if not available locally) for registered First Nations and recognized Inuit;
- Identification, prevention and planning for community resilience against emergency events, environmental health hazards and climate change adaptation;
- Healthy pregnancies, births and child development;
- Health promotion and disease prevention;
- Assisted living supports, including non-medical social supports through in-home care, adult foster care and long-term care facilities for residents on-reserve; and
- Health infrastructure projects to design, replace, expand, repair or otherwise renovate First Nations health facilities, addictions treatment centers and facilities hosting Aboriginal Head Start on-Reserve programming.

Indigenous Services Canada also continues to collaborate with Métis Nation partners on areas of shared health priorities. The Government has committed to the co-development of distinctions-based Indigenous health legislation with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation partners, which will begin the process of transforming health care delivery in Indigenous communities by ensuring Indigenous control over the development and delivery of health services. The Government has also announced a commitment and funding to support distinctions-based mental health and wellness strategies.

Throughout the pandemic, Indigenous Services Canada's first priority has been to provide Indigenous leadership with the resources they need to keep their communities safe. The department has made significant investments to support:

- Distribution of personal protective equipment (i.e., hand sanitizer, N95 masks, face shields and gloves) to First Nation communities and to other Indigenous communities and organizations when required urgently;
- Provided support to the North West Territories and Nunavut for programs that helped individuals contend with the pandemic through spending increased time on the land and practicing knowledge for food and resource gathering;
- Collection of swab samples for COVID-19 testing in First Nations and support for the deployment of rapid testing, including GeneXpert and ID NOW devices, with the National Microbiology Lab;
- Deployment of additional health personnel, supplementing the existing workforce to support First Nation communities;
- Facilitation of the air transportation of medical providers to First Nation communities in Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta;
- Work with the Canadian Armed Forces to help coordinate and expedite vaccination efforts in remote Indigenous communities; and
- Funding of surge health infrastructure solutions, supporting isolation, screening and assessment, accommodation requirements, mental health supports and supportive home care.

COVID-19 Health Supports

(as reported on June 1, 2021)

- 1,773 orders of personal protective equipment
- 397 additional nurses and 110 additional paramedics
- 6,649 experts air transported to remote communities
- 43,625 calls and online health chats answered from January to April 30, 2021
- 646 surge health projects funded
- 175 GeneXpert and 217 ID NOW rapid Point of Care testing devices deployed

Indigenous communities and individuals have been prioritized in vaccine roll-out across the country. Indigenous Services Canada continues to engage Indigenous partners, provincial and territorial representatives via the COVID-19 Vaccine Working Group, as well as through the associated First Nations, Inuit and Métis Living in Urban and Related Homelands Vaccine Task Group, co-chaired by Indigenous Services Canada and the National Association of Friendship Centres. These working groups have been a forum for co-planning, sharing information, strategic advice and direction on emerging issues, as well as facilitating consideration and inclusion of Indigenous populations and community perspectives throughout planning and implementation of the vaccine roll-out. The continued collaboration through these working groups will ensure an integrated and coordinated approach to support the administration of COVID-19 vaccines for all

Indigenous individuals. Deputy Ministers of Indigenous Affairs have also met regularly to provide updates and share best practices.

Indigenous communities have often lacked access to quality medical services in a timely manner and have faced unacceptable discrimination when accessing medical care. Limitations due to the remote nature of some communities as well as jurisdictional issues and racism have also played a role. But all Indigenous Peoples, especially children, deserve equitable access to quality medical services regardless of jurisdictional complications or any other matter. The department fully supports the implementation of Jordan's Principle and the Inuit Child First Initiative. Jordan's Principle is a legal obligation that Canada continues to uphold. It responds to the unmet needs of First Nations children by supporting parents and guardians in accessing products and services for their children. The Inuit Child First Initiative extends the same level of support to Inuit children.

The Government is fully committed to working with provinces and territories, Indigenous leaders, organizations and service providers to address systemic discrimination and racism at all levels in the health care system. In response to the tragic death of Joyce Echaquan, a 37-year-old mother of seven from the Atikamekw de Manawan, who died at the Joliette Hospital after receiving substandard care as well as degrading and racist insults from hospital staff, Indigenous Services Canada, Health Canada and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, hosted an urgent national dialogue on October 16th to listen to the lived experiences of racism of Indigenous peoples, both as patients and health care providers. A second national dialogue was held in January 2021 where governments, health care provider organizations and regulatory bodies presented short- and long-term concrete actions to address racism experienced by Indigenous Peoples in accessing health systems across Canada. .

At that meeting, the Minister announced a commitment of \$2 million to the Atikamekw Nation and Manawan First Nation for continued advocacy of Joyce's Principle, which aims to guarantee to all Indigenous Peoples the right of equitable access to social and health services, as well as the right to enjoy the best possible physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.

These national dialogues were designed with partners through an ISC-led planning committee that included representatives from national Indigenous organizations, Indigenous health professional organizations and Indigenous health advocates.

Collaboration between key partners in this space is essential to ensure access to culturally safe health services free of racism and discrimination for all Indigenous Peoples. The Government of Canada remains committed to ensuring Indigenous Peoples have access to culturally safe and high-quality health services.

Indigenous Services Canada is working with First Nations, Inuit and the Métis Nation on the co-development of distinctions-based Indigenous health legislation to improve access to high-quality and culturally-relevant health services. The engagement was

launched on January 28, 2021 and is supported by resources provided by the department. Provinces and territories will also be key partners in the process of co-developing options for potential federal legislation.

Indigenous Services Canada continues to work closely with Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami toward the joint commitment of eliminating tuberculosis across Inuit Nunangat by 2030. Budget 2018 announced \$27.5 million over five years to support Inuit-specific approaches to tuberculosis elimination, in addition to \$640 million over 10 years announced in Budgets 2017 and 2018 addressing Inuit Nunangat housing needs. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's Inuit Tuberculosis Elimination Framework, released in 2018, has driven progress on tuberculosis elimination. Regional action plans to eliminate tuberculosis have now been implemented across Inuit Nunangat. Indigenous Services Canada is committed to supporting the implementation of these action plans toward tuberculosis elimination goals. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Government of Canada reaffirmed this commitment on World Tuberculosis Day, March 24, 2021.

Moving forward, Budget 2021 proposes new investments to maintain essential health care services for Indigenous individuals, continue work to transform Indigenous health systems, and expand support for mental health and wellness on a distinctions basis. These proposed investments include but are not limited to initiatives that will:

- Strengthen the Non-Insured Health Benefits Program;
- Help increase the number of nurses, midwives, and other medical professionals in remote First Nations;
- Support efforts to transform how health care services are designed and delivered by First Nations, building on the government's commitment to improve access to high-quality and culturally relevant health care for Indigenous individuals;
- Take action to foster health systems free from racism and discrimination where Indigenous Peoples are safe, respected, and treated equally;
- Support distinctions based mental wellness strategies;
- Support First Nations' access to clean drinking water and support health and social service delivery on-reserve; and
- Support First Nations and Inuit to identify and manage the health impacts of climate change, increase access to country food and manage mental health impacts of climate change on youth.

Child and Family Services and Social Development

The number of Indigenous individuals who use or need access to social services is disproportionately greater than that of the non-Indigenous population. For example, 52.2% of children in foster care are Indigenous, but Indigenous children account for only 7.7% of the child population according to Census 2016. Indigenous Peoples are more likely to experience violent victimization while Indigenous women are more likely to require access to shelter services. Finally, stress, violence and inequities in mental

health exacerbated by the pandemic have compounded this reality.

Because a lack of safe shelter is one of the reasons that children are taken from their families, Indigenous Services Canada's First Nations Child and Family Services program funds prevention and protection services to support the safety and well-being of First Nations children and families living on-reserve and in the Yukon. The program funds provincially-delegated First Nations child and family services agencies, or provincially and territorially delivered services in areas where First Nation agencies do not exist, to provide protection services and prevention tools and methods so children stay safe and families can stay together.

But new approaches are needed. Responding to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal orders, the department is working with Indigenous partners to reform child and family services programming with a focus on community needs and with an emphasis on prevention and better outcomes.

Co-developed with partners, *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* is a key step towards the ultimate goal of keeping Indigenous children and youth connected to their families, communities, and culture and allowing them to thrive. The Act puts into law the affirmation and recognition of Indigenous Peoples' jurisdiction over child and family services across Canada.

The Act:

- Affirms the rights of First Nations, Inuit and the Métis Nation to exercise jurisdiction over child and family services;
- Establishes national principles such as the best interests of the child, cultural continuity and substantive equality;
- Contributes to the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;
- Provides an opportunity for Indigenous Peoples to choose their own solutions for their children and families; and
- Addresses Calls to Action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Calls for Justice outlined in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' Final reports.

As Indigenous governing bodies begin using the framework of the Act to exercise jurisdiction over child and family services, more comprehensive, culturally-specific child and family services will be established across Canada.

As a continuation of engagement and dialogue with Indigenous partners, provinces, and territories on the Act, the department has established via federal funding distinctions-based governance engagement mechanisms. The community, regional and national-level engagements are venues for parties to highlight issues and make recommendations to governments relating to the effective implementation of the Act.

The First Nations Child and Family Services program is also working with Indigenous partners to continue to develop reliable data collection and reporting methodologies for analyzing the need of First Nations Child and Family Services agencies. Amongst other objectives, this information is intended to inform the development of options for a reformed funding model. The participation of all Indigenous, Provincial and Territorial partners is also encouraged in the ongoing co-development of national data strategies, indicators and information-sharing agreements that are meaningful to First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, families and communities.

The department is committed to ensuring the safety and security of Indigenous women, children and families. Currently, Indigenous Services Canada's Family Violence Prevention Program supports the day-to-day operations of 46 shelters, as well as funding for community-driven proposals for family violence prevention projects on and off reserve. These shelters in First Nations across Canada provide a vital refuge for Indigenous women, children and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people to escape violent situations. They also provide culturally sensitive and relevant services that help provide families and communities with the tools needed to address or prevent violence.

In recognition of the particular needs of Indigenous women, children and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people and the heightened risks for family violence related to the pandemic, the Government of Canada announced \$724.1 million to launch a Comprehensive Violence Prevention Strategy to expand access to a continuum of culturally relevant supports for Indigenous women, children and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people facing gender-based violence in the 2020 Fall Economic Statement. This initiative will also support new shelters, in addition to the 12 emergency shelters announced in May 2020, as well as transitional (second stage) homes for First Nations, Inuit and Métis people across the country, including on reserve, within Inuit Nunangat, in other parts of the North, and in urban areas. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation will provide funding to support construction, and Indigenous Services Canada will fund operations through the Family Violence Prevention Program. Additionally, the enhancements to the prevention programming will help ensure that Indigenous shelters can provide access to culturally relevant services, such as programming focused on healing and violence prevention, as well as measures to ensure fewer Indigenous women, children, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people are turned away when they seek protection.

The gaps in safety between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people have been brought into sharp focus by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Indigenous Services Canada has supported the whole-of-government approach led by the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations to address the ongoing national tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people. In particular, Indigenous Services Canada has contributed to the development of a National Action Plan, through its cooperation and leadership in the Federal Pathway.⁶

In an effort to address the ongoing national tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, Budget 2021 proposes historic

investments to help build a safer, stronger, and more inclusive society. These proposed investments include the following department-led initiatives:

- Increased support for the Community Well-being and Jurisdiction Initiative so that First Nations not served by a delegated First Nation agency can keep First Nations children and families together within their communities;
- Increased funding under the First Nations Child and Family Services Program; and
- A new Pathways to Safe Indigenous Communities Initiative for Indigenous communities to develop more holistic community-based safety and wellness models.

Further to a Budget 2018 funding commitment, the Government of Canada has concluded First Nations-led engagement activities to understand how to make the Income Assistance Program more responsive to the needs of clients and communities. Two First Nations-led workshops were held in January 2021 to validate the National Engagement Summary Report. This Summary Report is expected to set the stage for a co-developed process on the next steps in Income Assistance reform. Furthermore, to support individuals and families in need with essential living expenses during the COVID-19 pandemic an additional \$270 million was made available in 2020-2021 to supplement the Income Assistance program.

Education

Educational levels are a strong indicator of individuals' and communities' other socio-economic outcomes including employment, income, and health. Education is a foundation that can lead to higher paying jobs, an increased understanding of individual or collective health issues and a community's ability to thrive and be self-sustaining, all of which can affect an individual's sense of wellbeing. However, Indigenous individuals' experiences of education in Canada are mired in a history of colonial assimilation practices, chronic underfunding and inadequate education systems on reserve. The results are lower educational outcomes for Indigenous Peoples. For example, according to a 2016 C. D. Howe Institute study, among First Nations adults living on-reserve, only four in 10 have finished high school, compared to nine in 10 in the non-Indigenous population. The graduation rate for Inuit adults is similarly low. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental effect on education systems across the country with forced school closures and the need for remote learning. These issues are more acutely felt in remote areas where the lack of high-speed internet infrastructure makes remote schooling more challenging.

Ensuring access to a quality education and the best possible outcomes for Indigenous students is a priority for Indigenous Services Canada. The department provides programs that support First Nations elementary and secondary education, as well as distinctions-based strategies for First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation post-secondary students. In order to address the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous

educational outcomes, Indigenous Services Canada also continues to shift its approach to supporting the delivery of education services, towards co-developed and distinctions-based strategies that focus on regional solutions.

In response to COVID-19, the Government of Canada made investments to support a safe return to elementary and secondary schools on reserves. The investment provided funding to meet the unique needs of schools and students during the pandemic. This included funding support for teachers, custodians and bus drivers, access to technology, purchasing e-learning software, and the development of take-home learning materials. This investment also supported schools with the necessary retrofits they needed to implement in order to follow public health guidelines and respect adequate physical distancing. The Government also provided additional support to help Indigenous early learning and child care facilities safely operate during the pandemic and also provided support to Indigenous individuals pursuing their post-secondary education. This was done through increased support to the First Nations Post-Secondary Student support program as well as the Inuit and Métis Nation Post-Secondary Education Strategies.

The department is moving forward with its commitment to bolster the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy. In 2021-2022 the department is making incremental investments to support employment and skills development opportunities for Indigenous youth during the pandemic, an initiative expected to reach approximately 10,300 youth.

Work continues to advance on implementation of the Inuit Crown Partnership Committee work plan for education. As noted in the 2020-2021 joint progress report, the majority of work plan deliverables are on track, with work underway on the Quality Education Framework.

Moving forward, the Government of Canada is committed to working with partners to transform the education system for Indigenous students. The department continues to participate in a collaborative process with the Assembly of First Nations on the co-development of a new approach for funding First Nations elementary and secondary education on reserve. This process has led to new interim regional funding models for elementary and secondary education that provides predictable funding comparable to what students enrolled in provincial education systems receive, plus additional support for language and cultural programming as well as kindergarten for children ages four and five at First Nations schools.

The Government of Canada recognizes that investing in education is an important part of the government's plan to build long-term economic resilience. Budget 2021 proposed new investments that include, but are not limited to, initiatives that will:

- Continue to support children on reserve so they can attend school safely by providing PPE for students and staff, and laptops to support online learning;
- Enhance funding formulas in critical areas such as student transportation while ensuring funding for First Nations schools remains predictable from year to year;

- Increase First Nations control over First Nations education by concluding additional Regional Education Agreements;
- Expand access to adult education by supporting First Nations people on reserve who wish to return to high school in their communities and complete their high school education; and
- Support Indigenous students through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program and the Inuit and Métis Nation Post-Secondary Education Strategies so that young Indigenous students can get through the COVID-19 pandemic, complete their education and succeed in their chosen fields.

Community Infrastructure and Emergency Management

Adequate community infrastructure and housing lead to healthier, safer, and more prosperous communities. Indigenous Services Canada works with First Nation governments and communities to improve housing conditions, update community infrastructure (roads and water treatment facilities) and provide clean drinking water on-reserve. The Government of Canada recognizes that new resources are needed to address the long-standing funding shortfalls for basic infrastructure in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities.

All people in Canada deserve access to clean drinking water. The Government remains fully committed to eliminating long and short-term drinking water advisories in First Nations. As of July 9, 2021, 108 long-term drinking water advisories have been lifted. As of July 9, 2021 there remain 51 long term drinking water advisories in 32 communities. Further, since November 2015, 180 short-term drinking water advisories have been lifted before they were able to become long-term.

Canada is working in partnership with First Nations on long-term and sustainable solutions so that communities will continue to have access to safe drinking water for generations to come. Since this time, more than \$4.7 billion has been invested in over 535 projects, with over 99 water treatment plants and 436 upgrades funded in efforts to achieve clean drinking water. This does not include individually-managed water and wastewater systems that go beyond the scope of ISC's current policies.

However, the February 2021 report from the Auditor General's Office concluded that Indigenous Services Canada has not provided enough support to adequately address the long-standing problems with safe drinking water for many of Canada's First Nations. The report highlighted that drinking water advisories remain a part of daily life in many of these communities, with some long-term advisories in place for more than a decade. As such, the Government of Canada acknowledges that considerable more work needs to be done.

Housing is a fundamental need and all people in Canada have the right to adequate, safe and affordable housing. Yet Indigenous Peoples are far more likely to experience poor living conditions or live in overcrowded housing than their non-Indigenous counterparts. This can lead to health risks, poor behavioral outcomes in children and elevated exposure to crime and violence, including domestic violence and specifically,

child abuse. The pandemic has shown inadequate housing to be a major risk factor in disease transmission and other social challenges from remote schooling to safe social distancing.

Indigenous Services Canada has invested in the construction of 3,067 First Nation homes and the renovation of a further 6,500 homes since 2016. Of these, 2,020 new homes have been completed, along with 4,069 renovations. These infrastructure related projects also resulted in a total of 66 new schools and 84 schools have been renovated or upgraded to ensure students on-reserve have a safe and appropriate place to receive their education. Infrastructure funding has also supported 210 health infrastructure projects (of which 200 are now complete) to design, replace, expand, repair or otherwise renovate First Nations health centres, nursing stations, substance use treatment centres and facilities hosting Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve programming.

Looking forward, the Government of Canada has stated its commitment to addressing critical infrastructure needs and closing the infrastructure gap between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities by 2030. Budget 2021 proposes distinctions-based investments to close these infrastructure gaps in Indigenous communities, which could include all-weather roads, broadband internet, health care and educational facilities. This will come through investments in the Indigenous Community Infrastructure Fund, a distinctions-based fund to support Indigenous partners with infrastructure projects in First Nations (including modern-treaty and self-governing First Nations), Inuit, and Métis Nation communities.

Economic Development

The ability for Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous individuals to participate fully in the Canadian economy is key to improving socio-economic outcomes. Strong Indigenous economies and full involvement of Indigenous individuals in

the Canadian economy also contribute to a strong Canadian economy. However, Indigenous individuals and businesses are still marginalized in their participation in the Canadian economy and fall behind non-Indigenous counterparts. The COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant shock to the Canadian economy. It has

- Mercury contamination in the English-Wabigoon River system was discovered in 1970.
- The exposure was high enough to cause severe mercury poisoning among several highly exposed community members residing in Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek and Wabaseemoong.
- In 2020 the Government of Canada signed agreements for the construction of mercury care facilities in Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek First Nation and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations to improve the health and wellbeing of community members, especially for those suffering from the effects of mercury exposure.
- As a result, residents in both Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Independent Nations will receive the care they need while staying closer to home, community and family.

compounded this gap while affecting areas such as employment. In the first few months of the pandemic, the unemployment rate among Indigenous individuals living off-reserve and in urban areas increased by seven per cent. It has also affected the ability for individuals to meet financial obligations.

Indigenous Services Canada is working with partners to foster the full economic participation of Indigenous communities and entrepreneurs and assist in their prosperity by creating jobs and growing businesses. Working with Indigenous partners, the department supports improved access to capital for Indigenous communities and entrepreneurs while working to leverage public and private sector partnerships and investments.

By reducing barriers and increasing access to capital for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis entrepreneurs, the Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program works to increase the number of viable businesses in Canada owned and controlled by Indigenous people. Working with the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association and a network of 54 Aboriginal Financial Institutions, the program provides \$33.9 million annually to Indigenous entrepreneurs and businesses across the country including \$31 million in direct support to Indigenous entrepreneurs and businesses across the country.

The Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program supports lending activities of Aboriginal Financial Institutions and Métis Capital Corporations by providing non-repayable contributions to Indigenous entrepreneurs to enable them to obtain a commercial loan. For the first time, in 2020 Indigenous Services Canada entered into separate program delivery agreements with the five Métis Capital Corporations for the delivery of the Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program. This distinctions-based approach marked a significant departure from the past where one overall Indigenous organization delivered the Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program to First Nations, Métis and Inuit. Aboriginal Financial Institutions and Métis Capital Corporations will also gain a significant boost in lending capacity when the \$150 million Indigenous Growth Fund launches. The Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program will be instrumental to the \$150 million Indigenous Growth Fund, which is expected to be an important tool for Indigenous businesses during the economic recovery, by enabling entrepreneurs to qualify for the Indigenous Growth Fund-sourced loans from their Aboriginal Financial Institution or Métis Capital Corporation, and to make this new source of financing affordable.

In order to help ensure that Indigenous businesses have access to financing, the National Aboriginal Capital Corporation Association, in collaboration with the Government of Canada, recently announced the development of an Indigenous Growth Fund, to be launched in September of 2021. The fund is designed to provide capital to Aboriginal Financial Institutions and ultimately Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs. Working in collaboration with the National Aboriginal Capital Corporation Association and the Business Development Bank of Canada, an innovative, sustainable new \$150 million fund has now been created. This will help to provide a long-term source of capital to support continued success for Indigenous businesses. It is important to note that the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association also launched, in

2019-2020, the Indigenous Women's Entrepreneurship Initiative, which is providing outreach and services specifically tailored to Indigenous women to increase the number of businesses owned by Indigenous women entrepreneurs. The latest Budget announced \$22 million over three years in support to this initiative.

Economic Development and Procurement has been recently introduced as a new priority area for the Inuit Crown Partnership Committee. A draft operational plan has been created, and an interdepartmental working group meeting occurred in early March 2021 to endorse the operational plan.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government was there to support Indigenous businesses through these challenging times and help them to participate in the economic recovery. Over the last year there have been investments in:

- The Indigenous Community Business Fund – \$133 million in non-repayable financial contributions to help support First Nation, Inuit and Métis community or collectively-owned businesses, microbusinesses and tourism businesses whose revenues have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- The COVID-19 Indigenous Small and Medium-sized Enterprises Initiative – \$306.8 million in support to small and medium-sized Indigenous enterprises impacted by the pandemic, aiding both Indigenous entrepreneurs and the Aboriginal Financial Institutions and Métis Capital Corporations that support them. Of that total, \$240 million is allocated for First Nations, Inuit and Métis businesses in the form of interest-free loans and non-repayable contributions;
- Decline in Own-Source Revenue – \$332.8 million to partially off-set the loss of own-source revenue that is used to pay for critical services at the community level. The funding was announced in the November 2020 Fall Economic Statement and will be dispersed to communities in Summer 2021.

The Government of Canada recognizes that more work needs to be done to support Indigenous communities through this pandemic and to ensure the long-term resilience of their economies. Budget 2021 proposes investments that will:

- Build capacity for local, economically-sustainable clean energy projects in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation communities and support economic development opportunities, through the horizontal Strategic Partnerships Initiative whose secretariat is housed at ISC;
- Renew the Indigenous Community Business Fund to ensure support for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation collectively-owned businesses and microbusinesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Establish a First Nations Finance Authority Emergency Fund to provide repayable financial support for borrowing members encountering difficulties due to COVID-19 or future widespread economic shocks;

- Establish a process to engage with Indigenous governments and organizations that are interested in implementing fuel, alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis sales tax within their reserves or settlement lands;
- Support the First Nations Finance Authority's launch of the Commercial Paper Program that will lower interest rates for First Nation borrowers so they can secure more manageable funding;
- Expand the Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program that will support Indigenous-led businesses and help Indigenous communities generate wealth by improving access to capital and business opportunities;
- Support the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada to help the Indigenous tourism industry rebuild and recover from the impacts of COVID-19;
- Support the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association's Indigenous Women's Entrepreneurship Initiative in achieving its target of increasing the number of Indigenous women entrepreneurs who access financing through Aboriginal Financial Institutions by 50 per cent;
- Amend legislation and regulations to expand the types of revenues that First Nations may use to support borrowing from the First Nations Finance Authority, specifically to include revenues from the First Nations Goods and Services Tax and the First Nations Sales Tax;
- Expedite the implementation of addition to reserve proposals by directly supporting capacity development and training to enable First Nations to unlock the economic opportunities found in urban reserves.

Services for Urban Indigenous Peoples

With over half the Indigenous population in Canada living in urban areas, the delivery of culturally sensitive programming and services for Indigenous individuals in urban centres is currently underdeveloped and underfunded. The Indigenous population is diverse with varied needs. It remains one of the fastest growing segments of the Canadian population, placing even greater pressure on already overextended programs and services offered by urban Indigenous service providers. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the unique needs of urban Indigenous individuals and the lack of specific and culturally-relevant services for these populations.

Indigenous Services Canada's Urban Programming for Indigenous Peoples assists First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation individuals living in or transitioning to urban areas and major city centres. It provides funding to Friendship Centres, Inuit organizations, the Métis Nation Governing Members and other non-affiliated Indigenous organizations across the country to provide urban Indigenous Peoples with culturally appropriate services and a safe place to come together.

Indigenous Services Canada will continue to work with the diversity of Indigenous partners who serve Indigenous Peoples in urban centres to ensure they have access to essential services.

Indigenous Community Support Fund

Aside from program-specific responses, from the earliest days of the pandemic,

Indigenous Services Canada has sought to address the immediate needs of Indigenous communities with fast, flexible funding that recognizes that Indigenous leadership best understand their community needs and how to respond. As of April 2021, approximately \$1.8 billion in support has been announced through the Indigenous Community Support Fund to support First Nations, Inuit, Métis Nation, and urban-based Indigenous communities and organizations to prepare, prevent and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fund provides Indigenous leadership and organizations with the flexibility needed to design and implement community-based solutions that include, but are not limited to:

- Support for Elders and community members experiencing barriers;
- Measures to address food insecurity;
- Educational and cultural supports for children;
- Mental health assistance and emergency response services;
- Preparedness measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (e.g., trucked water delivery, installation of physical barriers, perimeter security, and creation and establishment of isolation centres).

In order to ensure valuable resources were provided to the communities which needed them quickly during this crisis, the resources were distributed through existing channels through both direct allocations and on a needs-basis. On-reserve and self-governing First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation communities received formula-based funding directly from the department. Inuit Nunangat Regions also received formula-based funding using the allocation methodology determined by the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Board of Directors. A standard model was applied to decide funding allocations per regions, consistent with governing members' historical applications for federal funding.

Additionally, part of the available resources were distributed on an application-driven needs-basis to ensure resources could go where they were most needed. This portion of the fund was accessible to First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation communities, as well as Indigenous organizations serving Indigenous Peoples, including those who provide services to Indigenous Peoples in urban and off-reserve settings.

In the early stages of the pandemic, the Indigenous Community Support Fund distributed a total of \$90 million to Indigenous organizations and communities providing services to First Nations people off reserve, including in urban areas, to support essential services to the most vulnerable and to prevent and respond to potential COVID-19 outbreaks.

The approach to the Indigenous Community Support Fund is novel for the Government of Canada. The approach illustrates that when Indigenous leadership and communities are given the necessary resources and flexibility, they are best placed to ensure the safety and security of their members, and are effective at providing services to their communities. The success and strength of communities in managing the pandemic response have demonstrated the improved outcomes that result when the Government takes a broad approach to funding Indigenous governments and organizations to determine, plan, and deliver services. Indigenous Services Canada will continue to learn from this approach and use lessons learned to inform what is needed for the successful transfer of services to Indigenous governments and organizations.

- First Farms & Forests Centre for Indigenous Food Sovereignty received support to improve access to traditional culturally-sensitive whole foods for low income and vulnerable urban Indigenous youth, Elders and families at risk in the Norfolk, Hamilton and Niagara regions.
- Atlohsa Family Healing Services received funding to support Indigenous community members through an Indigenous-based hot meal program to children and youth daily during the pandemic.
- Atlohsa Family Healing services also provided access to technology to connect Indigenous families to their service providers and ensure communications and planning are prioritized during the pandemic.

Part 2: Advancing the Gradual Transfer of Departmental Responsibilities to Indigenous Control

Charting an approach forward

The *Department of Indigenous Services Act* sets out the department's mandate to implement "the gradual transfer of departmental responsibilities to Indigenous organizations." In seeking to fulfill this mandate, the department is working towards fundamental change in how the rights and needs of Indigenous Peoples and communities are met by the Government of Canada, while putting the emphasis on the right of self-determination. Indigenous Services Canada recognizes Indigenous control over service design and delivery is essential to ensuring high-quality, culturally relevant services—services that ultimately will lead to better socio-economic outcomes for First Nations, Inuit and Métis individuals, families and communities. By necessity, this shift will not happen overnight and will only be successful by working in partnership with Indigenous communities and organizations to find the best paths forward at a pace determined by partners.

The transfer of control of services is fundamentally about Indigenous self-determination. As such, the process to enact change must also accord with the right of self-determination; transfer cannot proceed without the full partnership of rights holders. Successful transfer will only be achieved through strong, respectful, effective and ethical relationships. In the spirit of treaties, land claims and self-government, the department commits to base relationships on the recognition of Indigenous rights, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. Indigenous Services Canada will work closely with Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs to ensure coherence among approaches to advance self-determination, self-governance and reconciliation. Indigenous Services Canada's mandate will continue to align with the advancement of self-determination in the context of the constitutional framework and will work with Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, whose mandate is to negotiate on the basis of Section 35 rights. Indigenous Services Canada will also work with other federal government departments, as well as provincial and territorial counterparts who have various roles in the provision of services to Indigenous individuals.

The mandate to transfer service design, development and delivery to Indigenous-led organizations is also closely linked with the mandate to close socio-economic gaps between Indigenous individuals and non-Indigenous Canadians. This legislated commitment responds to what has consistently been heard from First Nations, Inuit, and the Métis Nation: recognition of jurisdiction and increased control over services results in improved outcomes. Self-governing Indigenous entities and institutions that reflect and meet the distinct needs of their citizens – culturally, linguistically, geographically, socially, economically, and operationally – are better placed to identify and address the various health, educational, social, and economic challenges facing their citizens. Placing Indigenous Peoples' distinct, lived experiences at the centre of Indigenous

public services will help achieve substantive equality for communities and individuals, while respecting the right of self-determination.

The path to transfer of responsibilities is not a straight line but one with many complex systems, jurisdictions and legal arrangements to navigate. Given the diversity of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation communities and the current complexity of public service arrangements, no one model can be applied to advance control of services for all communities. To be reflective of the unique needs and situations of Indigenous communities as well as the unique challenges of different service types, a diversity of approaches will be developed and implemented. Currently Indigenous services are provided through many different approaches at the national, regional, and community level. Arrangements may be needed to transfer services at different levels of aggregation, which may require the development of new partnerships, organizations or Indigenous-led institutions.

In some situations, Indigenous communities or organizations may be fully able and willing to take full control of the design, development and delivery of services. In others, there may be a need to explore options to increase Indigenous control while continuing a federal government role, or support the development of capacity to enable transfer. The department will take a flexible and long-term approach to ensure communities that are ready for transfer can proceed, while making sure that those who need different arrangements or additional supports are not left behind.

To create the conditions for a significant reduction of the federal role in the provision of services to Indigenous individuals, there is significant groundwork to accomplish on the part of both the federal government and Indigenous partners. With this in mind, Indigenous Services Canada is committed to working internally and externally to enable change. This means establishing sufficient funding levels for services, addressing jurisdictional, legal and policy barriers, and co-developing mutual accountability arrangements. The path forward will likely necessitate legislative change and creative solutions to moving beyond the *Indian Act*.

The department acknowledges that the current suite of departmentally-administered programs and services does not reflect the needs or choices of many Indigenous communities. In taking an approach that affirms self-determination and seeks to advance substantive equality, the department will work with partners to identify needs and gaps and follow its legislated mandate to transfer responsibilities rather than constraining transfer to existing program structures. This will be of particular importance to advancing the transfer of responsibilities to Inuit, the Métis Nation and urban Indigenous organizations, for whom existing departmental programs are often limited.

Indigenous Services Canada is working to integrate direction towards transfer across all areas of the department. Recognizing the unprecedented extent of change necessary to meet its commitment, the Department has been working to set the internal conditions for maintaining this priority to advance long-term sustainable change. Looking forward, the department will work with Indigenous partners to develop a coherent set of principles

and direction to guide the diversity of paths taken forward. Through working together, necessary conditions for success and a common vision of progress is to be defined. This will continue to be done on the basis of the renewed nation-to-nation, government-to-government, and Inuit-Crown relationship based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership as the foundation for transformative change.

While work is underway to move toward the transfer of responsibilities, Indigenous Services Canada will continue to improve existing programs both to improve socio-economic outcomes and increase Indigenous control in service design, delivery and decision making. The department will also continue to meet its existing obligations and look for the best approaches to address emerging needs with Indigenous communities.

The following pages of the report present an update in two sections on how the department is moving forwards towards transfer: first, in working with partners to create the foundational conditions for successful transfer, and second, with specific initiatives that are seeing Indigenous organizations take over what traditionally would be federal government programs and services.

Creating the conditions for transfer

The department is working with Indigenous partners to create the conditions for successful fulfillment of the legislated mandate to transfer. This work includes building the fiscal mechanisms to enable autonomy in program delivery, developing the legal and policy conditions to recognize the rights of communities to pursue real options to exercise self-determination - as well as the capacity supports to enable exercise of those rights - and supporting the development of Indigenous public institutions. The transfer of responsibility requires significant shifts in how the department supports Indigenous Peoples. With that comes required changes not only at the individual service level but in how we work at a systemic level. While this orientation to increasing Indigenous control is not new, and many of the initiatives detailed below have origins that predate the legislated mandate, this work has taken on increasing foundational importance in how the department moves forward.

A New Fiscal Relationship

Throughout discussions around service transfer to First Nation communities, one message has stood out – there can be no successful transfer or exercising of jurisdiction without a long-term funding commitment and financing tools. To meet this need, the Government of Canada, the Assembly of First Nations and key partners began working together to establish a New Fiscal Relationship. The result is a 10-year grant funding mechanism that was implemented in 2019. This initiative aims to provide more long-term stabilized program supports for eligible First Nations who choose to join the grant while enabling them to build capacity and do effective planning further into the future than ever before and providing flexibility to respond to emerging priorities as demonstrated through pandemic responses. In 2020-21, 26 First Nations entered into a

10-year grant, bringing the total up to 110 First Nations. Budget 2021 includes a measure to ensure funding escalation for the 10-year grants to address price and population growth and ensure that funding keeps pace with the needs of First Nations.

The department also continues to explore the interim recommendations of the Assembly of First Nations-Indigenous Services Canada Joint Advisory Committee on Fiscal Relations to further advance the New Fiscal Relationship. These include:

- Co-development of a mutual accountability framework supported by stronger First Nation-led institutions;
- Continued work with First Nations to replace the Default Prevention and Management Policy with a new and proactive approach that supports capacity development in partnership with Indigenous-led organizations; and,
- Collaboration with Indigenous leaders to finalize a National Outcome-Based Framework, including co-development of baseline indicators, to comprehensively measure and track the closure of socio-economic gaps; and
- Ongoing dialogue on establishing a funding transfer model that resembles the statutory funding regime in place between Canada and the provinces.

Developing the New Fiscal Relationship has been a key area of focus for the department. The result is a collaborative process that moves towards a sufficient, predictable and sustainable funding relationship that will not only offer fiscal mechanisms for transfer or responsibilities, but also help close the socio-economic gaps between First Nations and other Canadians.

Indigenous Governance and Capacity Funding

Progress towards service transfer relies on the capacity of Indigenous governments to implement community-driven, nation-based community development and planning initiatives that engage Indigenous Peoples in expressing their own strengths and visions for the future. The Indigenous Community Development National Strategy was co-developed through partnerships between representatives of First Nations, Indigenous organizations, Indigenous Services Canada and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada and includes an ongoing engagement process with Indigenous community advisors across regions. The National Strategy is designed to guide the Government of Canada in supporting Indigenous Peoples and communities according to their self-determined priorities. It can be applied in a flexible way to: meet unique and diverse regional needs with the goal of supporting planning and general capacity building; support community-to-community learning; break down silos within and between departments; and increase the federal public service's cultural competencies, which is in alignment with Indigenous Services Canada's internal Indigenous Cultural Competency Learning Policy. Work is underway to increase awareness for and implement the strategy on a national level through the Indigenous Community Development National Strategy Working Group which includes participants from

Indigenous Services Canada, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, as well as Indigenous Advisors from across Canada. This strategy and its principles will be an important horizontal framework in advancing service transfer in a way that meets the needs of Indigenous peoples at a community level and advances self-determination.

Indigenous Services Canada is committed to ensuring all communities are able to exercise self-determination; community-directed federal support to Indigenous workforces is critical. Funding for governance and capacity is provided through the Indigenous Governance and Capacity programs. These programs, along with the Indigenous Community Development National Strategy, are integral to supporting Indigenous communities on their path towards self-determination. Budget 2021 identified funding to support the administrative capacity of First Nations governments and other organizations that deliver critical programs and services. This funding is an interim measure to address funding shortfalls while the Indigenous Governance and Capacity programs are modernized. Budget 2021 also proposes new resources to implement a pilot program which will build on the successes of the Ring of Fire pilot project in partnership with First Nations communities with the greatest community development needs. The pilot project will apply the pillars of the Indigenous Community Development National Strategy to fund community development teams comprised of departmental staff, First Nations partners, and other partners that will provide coordinated wrap-around support as well as targeted, flexible funding to identify and advance community priorities.

Supporting Indigenous institutions and legislative frameworks to advance self-determination

The establishment of legislative and policy options for increased self-determination is an important pathway forward for transferring responsibilities to Indigenous organizations. Legislative change is often essential where elements of the Indian Act set a role for the Crown that constrains self-determination. Within past legislative changes, Indigenous public institutions have also been established which support Indigenous communities to make use of these alternatives as well as move forward new areas of self-determination, in keeping with the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

Child and Family Services

The result of extensive work and co-development with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation partners, *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* came into force on January 1, 2020. The Act affirms the rights of Indigenous governments to exercise jurisdiction over First Nation, Inuit, and Métis Nation child and family services. Participating Indigenous communities can now develop policies and laws based on their particular histories, cultures, and circumstances - all towards the ultimate goal of reducing the number of Indigenous children and youth in care, and to the betterment of their communities.

To implement the Act, the Government of Canada committed over \$542 million over five years, starting in 2020-21, as part of the July 2020 Economic and Fiscal Update. This includes:

- Nearly \$10 million over 2 years for governance engagement mechanisms;
- \$425 million over 5 years for capacity-building funding; and
- Nearly \$74 million over 5 years for coordination agreement discussions.

In 2020-21, the department provided approximately \$16 million in capacity building funding, and funded the Assembly of First Nations to advance culturally-appropriate reforms of child and family services. Additionally, Canada signed a protocol with the Assembly of First Nations and developed a joint work plan with the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami through the Inuit Crown Partnership Committee table – both designed to support the implementation of the Act.

Since the Act came into force, almost 100 Indigenous communities across Canada have started the process that will lead to the development and implementation of policies and laws based on their particular histories, cultures, and circumstances with regards to child and family services.

In 2020-21, 15 Coordination Agreement discussions began with Indigenous Governing Bodies seeking to create and implement their own laws for their communities. An additional 20 discussion tables are expected to commence in 2021-22 and every year thereafter.

In early 2021, an Indigenous Governing Body representing the Wabaseemoong Independent Nations, a First Nation in northwestern Ontario with a population of 2,000, began to exercise jurisdiction of child and family services jurisdiction under the Act.

As a continuation of engagement and dialogue with Indigenous partners, provinces, and territories on the Act, the department has established distinctions-based governance engagement mechanisms. The community, regional and national-level engagements are venues for parties to highlight issues and make recommendations to governments relating to the effective implementation of the Act, such as:

- Coordination of information sharing;
- Principles related to determining funding amounts;
- Principles related to coordination of multiple family and community ties;
- Oversight and evaluation;
- A data strategy;
- In-take systems, responsibility and coordination;
- Liability; and
- Substantive equality.

This engagement and dialogue could include the participation of national, regional, and community governments and organizations that represent First Nations, Inuit and the

Métis Nation, section 35 right holders, Treaty Nations, self-governing First Nations, federal, provincial, and territorial governments, as well as experts and those with lived experience, including Elders, youth and women.

First Nations Elections Act

The *First Nations Elections Act* (FNEA) demonstrates the potential of working with partners to create First Nations-led alternatives to *Indian Act* provisions. Since 2015, First Nations have had the option to hold elections held under the FNEA rather than the *Indian Act*. This Act was created through the work of the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs and the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs with First Nations. To date 76 First Nations have passed resolutions to use the more modern and democratic processes available under the FNEA, eliminating the federal role in First Nations elections.

First Nations Fiscal Management Act

The *First Nations Fiscal Management Act*, enacted in 2006, provides First Nations the legislative tools and authority over fiscal matters, including financial management, property taxation and local revenue generation. Currently, 302 First Nations have opted into the Act with more taking steps to join every year. Alongside providing First Nations more fiscal authority, the Act established the First Nation Financial Management Board, the First Nation Tax Commission and the First Nation Finance Authority to administer the regime and support First Nations exercising powers under the Act. Recently, the First Nations Tax Commission has been working to support the development of a First Nation-led Infrastructure Institute, with the creation of a Development Board and Technical Working Group. The First Nation Finance Authority is also working with Indigenous Services Canada on approaches to enable First Nations to use their infrastructure capital transfers to access bond financing.

First Nations Land Management

First Nations Land Management is a Nation-to-Nation agreement that enables First Nations to opt-out of 44 lands-related sections of the *Indian Act* and replaces them with a community-developed land governance law or land code. The agreement is a strong example of progress towards the department's mandate to transfer services to Indigenous organizations. Not only does the initiative enable First Nations to exercise jurisdiction and control over their lands, but the services guiding communities along the path to enacting their land code (e.g., technical support, funding) are largely delivered by Indigenous partner organizations.

There are currently 178 signatories to the Framework Agreement with 101 First Nations operational under the regime. A further 57 First Nations receive capacity-building funding to support the development of their Land Code. Activities are supported by an elected First Nations Lands Advisory Board and the First Nations Land Management

Resource Centre, a First Nation-led technical advisory and service delivery organization.

The National Aboriginal Lands Managers Association and the First Nations Land Management Resource Centre lead the administration of the Land Use Planning Initiative by taking on development, assessment, and approval of applications; coordination of intake; providing technical support and training to First Nations developing land use plans; and flowing funding for land use plans to First Nations.

“In the past 21 years, 100 First Nations have utilized the Framework Agreement to exercise their inherent right to govern their lands and resources. This is decolonization in action.”
Robert Louie, Lands Advisory Board Chairman.

The National Lands Managers Association, a national organization of First Nation Land Managers which will actively network towards the enhancement of professional development and technical expertise in the functions of land management, has been supporting *Indian Act* First Nations in the development of land use plans and providing technical support and capacity building to First Nations through a Professional Land Management Certification Program. To date over 200 First Nations have received land use planning training and a further seven First Nations are being supported for the development of a land use plan.

The First Nation Land Management Resource Centre has created a Land Use Planning Hub to support First Nations in the development of land use planning specific to the Framework Agreement. Forty First Nations have or are currently receiving support for the development of a land use plan. A further 105 First Nations have received capacity training through a land use planning workshop.

Indigenous Services Canada will continue to work with its First Nation partners to simplify the *First Nations Land Management Act* and expand the Framework Agreement on First Nation Land Management, as requested by First Nations. Program changes are also underway to further transfer the intake process to the First Nations Land Management Resource Centre.

Indigenous Center for Cumulative Effects

Taking a different path than the legislative creation of institutions, the Indigenous Center for Cumulative Effects was created through a co-development process to support the technical and scientific capacity of Indigenous communities to undertake cumulative effects assessment, monitoring and management, based on the values of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation communities. It was incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in November 2019 and operates independently of government. The first of its kind, the Centre is actively supporting community-based cumulative effects research, developing and training tools to enhance the technical capacity of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation communities to undertake this work, and is implementing various networking platforms and opportunities for communities to share their work and best practices.

Indigenous Services Canada is also examining what internal departmental functions will need to be moved to Indigenous organizations in order to fully support transfer. Part three of this Report provides more extensive detail about the advancement of Indigenous data capacity as one of those internal functions that are increasingly supported externally.

Initiatives to Transfer Services & Exercise Jurisdiction

The transfer of federal government responsibilities to Indigenous control is a long-term direction that began before the *Department of Indigenous Services Canada Act* legislated the mandate. Significant work is already underway to see particular service transfer arrangements put into place. The particulars of transfer vary from service area to service area. This variation demonstrates the need to take a diversity of approaches to reflect different program contexts and Indigenous community needs.

Education Agreements

Ensuring access to a quality education and the best possible outcomes for First Nations students is a priority for Indigenous Services Canada.

The department continues to work with interested First Nations to develop Regional Education Agreements that recognize the rights of First Nations to control their own education institutions that respond to their own education goals and priorities. Regional Education Agreements can help:

- Regionalize funding, thus giving greater control to partners over the allocation of national program budgets to advance the vision of First Nation control of First Nation education, as defined by First Nations within the region;
- Formalize education partnerships to further the development of self-directed education systems; and
- Co-develop indicators and targets to measure results.

These agreements identify how the Government of Canada can best support First Nations schools, communities, and education organizations to provide students on reserve a high-quality, culturally appropriate education.

In 2020-21, three Regional Education Agreements were signed between Canada and Indigenous groups: Elsipogtog First Nation Education Authority; Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation Education Authority; and the Whitecap Dakota First Nation, bringing the total number of agreements signed to seven.

An additional 40 First Nation communities or education organizations are being supported in developing regional education agreements, with three more regional education agreements anticipated to be finalized in 2021-22.

On top of this work, the department continues to work with First Nations partners to refine funding models, identify priorities, and explore opportunities to improve outcomes for First Nation students. The Department is also continuing to work with First Nations across the country at technical tables to discuss and co-develop adjustments to the interim funding formulas that best meet their students' needs and priorities.

Transfer of Community Infrastructure

Indigenous Service Canada continues to work with First Nations on new and co-developed approaches towards the delivery of infrastructure services. In the last year, several First Nations-led organizations across the country have advanced work exploring new co-developed service delivery models for housing and infrastructure on a regional and sub-regional scale. Many of these models build on the National First Nations Housing and Related Infrastructure Strategy that was co-developed with the Assembly of First Nations. The models being applied vary across the country, with a range of ideas related to structure, scope or delivery approaches. Indigenous Services Canada-supported organizations include:

- Atlantic First Nations Water Authority: signed a Framework Agreement in June 2020, leading to the start of interim operations of the organization with a plan for full transfer as early as the fiscal year 2022-2023;
- First Nations Housing and Infrastructure Council (British Columbia): Currently developing a process to take on the full suite of housing and infrastructure services for First Nations communities in British Columbia. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed January 2019 and work continues on the development of a Framework Agreement;
- First Nation Infrastructure Institute: Currently working to develop a national centre of excellence for infrastructure projects to provide direct capacity support to Indigenous communities based on lifecycle management approaches while potentially becoming a fourth institution under the *Fiscal Management Act*;

Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation Education Authority Agreement

- Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation is one of the largest First Nations in Canada, representing eight communities spread out over 20,000 square kilometers. It is located in Treaty Six territory in Saskatchewan.
- It administers education services for seven on-reserve schools, with approximately 1,430 students.
- The Agreement recognizes the First Nation's choice of establishing an independent school board.
- The school board will be responsible for all education programming, with a direct funding relationship between the Authority and Indigenous Services Canada.
- The Agreement includes support for funding stabilization and also clearly defines the requirements for the Education Authority to report back to its members and the department.

- First Nations Technical Services Advisory Group Inc. (Alberta): Working on a feasibility study as well as a value proposition for leadership endorsement to deliver infrastructure services to First Nations in Alberta;
- First Nations Capital and Infrastructure Agency of Saskatchewan: Created through the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations, the First Nations Capital and Infrastructure Agency of Saskatchewan is working to take on the full suite of housing and infrastructure services for First Nations in Saskatchewan. A co-developed framework agreement was signed in March 2021 and the full service transfer is expected by 2023-2024;
- Confederation of Mainland Mi'kmaq: Currently developing a feasibility study (addressing capacity, gaps and services for all infrastructure assets) that could be delivered for the eight member First Nations;
- Southern Chiefs Organization (Manitoba): Initial scoping, engagement and model development underway for water and wastewater services for 34 First Nations in Manitoba;
- Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq – In the initial scoping phase, with a development model and capacity building underway for housing and infrastructure services;
- North Shore Mi'kmaq District Council: Feasibility study under development for the creation of an asset management and service delivery hub.

Atlantic First Nations Water Authority

- In June 2020, the Deputy Minister of ISC and the Atlantic First Nation Water Authority (the Water Authority) signed a Framework Agreement that led to its formal initiation and the start of interim operations.
- Through the interim operations stage, the Water Authority is conducting additional engagements, hiring staff, and developing in-depth asset management and capital investment plans. This work will enable the Water Authority to finalize their fully costed business plan and enable the full transfer of water and waste water services to the organization as early as fiscal year 2022-2023.
- The Water Authority is an opt-in model and will be a full service water and wastewater utility, comparable to the Halifax Regional Municipality model. The Water Authority currently has 14 participating First Nations, but expects one or two additional communities to join the Water Authority prior to transfer.

Since 2017, Indigenous Services Canada has invested \$15 million in targeted funds to support the work to transfer infrastructure services to First Nations.

Emergency Management

The mandate to transfer responsibilities has been advanced through strong partnerships that allow Indigenous organizations to lead and take decisions rather than the department. As part of Budget 2019, the FireSmart funding stream was established to support wildfire management initiatives. In British Columbia, the First Nations' Emergency Services Society is the service partner for the department's FireSmart

funding envelope. This First Nations-led organization coordinates a proposal based approach for First Nations' technical and resource capacity and training needs around wildfire management. The First Nations' Emergency Services Society is a non-profit registered charity, dedicated to assisting British Columbia First Nations to develop and sustain safer and healthier communities through emergency preparedness, education and response, fire training, education and prevention and forest fuel and wildfire management.

Waste Management

Under the First Nations Waste Management Initiative, the Lands and Economic Development Sector has been expanding its partnerships with Indigenous organizations to undertake responsibility for projects, programs, training and education for solid waste management. Partners include the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq, the Indigenous Zero Waste Technical Advisory Group and the First Nations Technical Services Advisory Group. The First Nations Waste Management Initiative also works with a National Indigenous Advisory Committee to guide the implementation of the Initiative and supports the establishment of regional First Nations waste management committees in several regions.

Health Services

Working with its partners, Indigenous Services Canada has transferred to varying degrees, the responsibility and management of programs, services and specific health facilities to First Nations and Inuit organizations. This includes the transfer of some health programming and services to 25 self-governing First Nations and Inuit communities, comprising 43 Indigenous communities across the country. This also includes the full transfer and delivery of all First Nations and Inuit Health Branch programs and services to the First Nations Health Authority in British Columbia.

As outlined in the 2020 Speech from the Throne, the Government of Canada is expediting work to co-develop distinctions-based Indigenous health legislation with First Nations, Inuit, and the Métis Nation. In December 2020, the Government committed \$15.6 million over two years to support this initiative. Indigenous Services Canada will work collaboratively with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation partners as well as provinces to define the scope and parameters of a distinctions-based Indigenous health legislation and address health gaps for Indigenous peoples in Canada.

This will also build on some of the health transformation efforts already underway across the country to establish new governance models that support First Nations-led institutions to assume responsibility for the design, delivery, and management of federally-funded health services.

Building on the positive outcomes of the First Nations Health Authority model, the department continues to work with interested regional partners to support First Nations as they endeavor to design, deliver and control their own health services. This work is always done in close collaboration with and keeping provincial health systems in mind.

Recent milestones that have been achieved include:

- Manitoba – in June 2020, Southern Chiefs Organization signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Indigenous Services Canada to formalize a commitment to work together on a new health system governance model. Currently, the organization is engaging 17 communities and developing potential governance models;
- Manitoba – in 2018, the Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak signed an agreement with Indigenous Services Canada which created the Keewatinohk Inniniw Minoayawin aggregate health entity. In July 2020 this health entity took over mental wellness programming; created partnerships with provincial health entities for training, diagnostic and physician services; and, established joint substance use isolation centres across the province;
- Quebec – The First Nations Health and Social Services Commission of Quebec and Labrador successfully finalized and signed a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding with the Province of Quebec and the Government of Canada in August 2019. They have also developed a decision-making process and interim governance mechanism pending the formal adoption of the new health and social services governance model.
- Ontario – Nishnawbe Aski Nation, the Government of Canada and the Province of Ontario committed to transforming the health system across Northern Ontario by signing The Charter of Relationship Principles Governing Health System Transformation in 2017. The goal is to establish a health system that is patient-centred, focused on wellness, and responsive to community needs. Work is underway on the Wechedowin (Helping Each Other) document to advance key

First Nations Health Authority in British Columbia

The [British Columbia Tripartite Framework Agreement on First Nation Health Governance](#) (2011), signed by the Government of Canada, the Government of British Columbia, the First Nations Health Society, and endorsed by the First Nations Health Council, led to the creation of the First Nations Health Authority.

In 2013, The First Nations Health Authority assumed control over the design, management, delivery, and funding for all First Nations health programs and services in British Columbia from the Government of Canada.

This successful model has resulted in First Nations' control over decisions affecting their health, supports greater integration and coordination of health services with the provincial health system, and has led to more culturally responsive programming based on the needs of First Nations.

commitments from the Charter of Relationship Principles, which outlines the Nishnawbe Aski Nation's vision of a Health Commission that would provide and coordinate services across the territory.

- Nova Scotia – A project team has been launched to support the development of a new province-wide entity called Tajikeimik, which would operate as a new Mi'kmaw Health and Wellness Authority. Work is currently underway on a Memorandum of Understanding that would capture a shared vision, process and priorities for transforming the delivery of health care services.

Alongside progress towards health transformation, individual programs are continuing to increase Indigenous control over health services. The First Nations and Inuit Health Care Branch's Clinical and Client Care program is responsible for the direct provision of primary care services in 51 remote and isolated First Nations. As part of the strategy to transfer the responsibility of care to communities, which allow communities to best direct their care and address their care needs, Indigenous Services Canada has transferred the management of nursing stations to 28 communities over the last number of years. The First Nations and Inuit Health Branch's Quebec region is currently in the process of transferring the management of the Winneway nursing station to the community, which will be the 29th community where responsibility has been transferred to local control.

Indigenous Services Canada's eHealth Program is partnering with Keewaytinook Okimakanak (KO eHealth) to improve the health of communities through a sustainable First Nations Telehealth service that is holistic, community driven and culturally appropriate. KO eHealth delivers clinical, educational and administrative services via videoconferencing and advanced information communication technologies to First Nations communities in Ontario. The eHealth Program is also partnering with the First Nations Technical Services Advisory Group in Alberta Region to support Telehealth services in communities. The advisory group delivers and manages Telehealth services including clinical and education sessions for First Nations communities in Alberta.

The work on the mandate to transfer responsibilities to Indigenous control is still in the early stages, but as this report has highlighted, there are many promising models to build from. Moving forward, the department will continue to work with First Nations, Inuit, and the Métis Nation to determine pathways forward that reflect the unique needs and choices of their individual communities.

Part 3: Indigenous Data Gaps

Existing data gaps and their implications

The need for quality data to help improve health, socio-economic and other outcomes is particularly important for First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada. Although research shows that there has been some improvement to basic socio-economic indicators such as income, health, housing, employment, and education for the Indigenous populations in Canada, gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations persist. A more comprehensive analysis of these gaps was conducted for the 2020 Report to Parliament.⁷

The 2020 Report to Parliament relied heavily on data from the Census of Canada, which remains the cornerstone of Indigenous data with the ability to support distinctions-based, cross-time analyses for all of Canada, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis, and in the territories. Nonetheless, the Census has limitations concerning measuring gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Canada. Most obviously, it is collected only every five years, meaning it cannot be used to track year-by-year progress or the effectiveness of recent actions taken to close gaps. Although differences and changes in self-identification over time are possible, self-reported data can be vulnerable to error given variations in how respondents interpret or understand the Indigenous identity questions, as well as their individual choices respecting whether and how to identify themselves as an Indigenous person on a data collection instrument.

Other data sources have limitations as well when it comes to measuring outcomes among Indigenous populations. Just like the Census, the reporting of health and socio-economic outcomes of Indigenous individuals in Statistics Canada's surveys is based on self-identification. Additionally, the surveys generally exclude reserves and some remote areas, and the sample sizes are often too small to support distinctions-based statistics. Similarly, Indigenous identities are not captured in vital statistics (births and deaths registries) and only sometimes in the context of health surveillance.

These gaps in data on Indigenous Peoples have become even more evident in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although efforts to track COVID-19 cases in First Nation have supported robust statistics in many regions, Indigenous people living off-reserve or in urban settings are part of provincial/territorial surveillance systems. As of April 2021, seven provinces and territories submitted COVID-19 case data that include information on Indigenous identity. Moreover, jurisdictions do not always have Indigenous identity on the data collection/reporting forms used in health surveillance in their province/territory, which makes accurate reporting or analysis for Indigenous Peoples very challenging. The result is an incomplete picture of the burden and impact of COVID-19 in Indigenous Peoples beyond First Nations. This ultimately makes it difficult for the federal and provincial governments or other organizations to tailor effective

public health responses to keep those living in urban settings safe as the pandemic evolves. In the longer term, broader data gaps that mask inequalities and reduce the efficacy of service delivery can undermine Indigenous Peoples' recovery from the pandemic and exacerbate existing socioeconomic and health gaps.

Addressing COVID-19 data gaps in the short-term

Funding research, data collection and engagement:

Several short-term initiatives have been put in place to address COVID-19 data gaps among Indigenous Peoples. These initiatives include funding Indigenous-led public health surveillance, research, data collection and engagement with Indigenous communities. First, several projects have received federal funding under the Safe Restart Agreement.⁸**Error! Bookmark not defined.** The funding will support the assessment of data gaps, the examination of issues surrounding data governance, and ultimately the improved availability of data to support COVID-19 tracking and response, both through the collection of new data and the sharing and linking of existing data sources.

Second, regarding data collection, plans are underway to collect COVID-19 data through the Surveys on Indigenous Peoples program. In 2022, Statistics Canada will launch the Indigenous Peoples Survey, which will include a mini-module on COVID-19 health and socio-economic impacts for First Nations people living off-reserve, Inuit, and Métis. Complementary data for on-reserve populations are also being explored through existing survey initiatives with the First Nations Information Governance Centre.

Finally, since the beginning of the pandemic, Statistics Canada has adapted its data collection activities focusing mainly on online surveys using crowdsourcing techniques. To this end, the department is working with Statistics Canada to encourage Indigenous individuals' participation in their online surveys on COVID-19 impacts, though recognizing that limited internet access in many Indigenous communities is an ongoing barrier.

Data sharing with provinces and Indigenous partners:

Another short-term solution the department is participating in is data sharing arrangements with provinces and/or Indigenous partners. This involves sharing administrative data that is in the department's possession with partners who are providing or supporting services to Indigenous individuals. The department is working with Indigenous organizations, provincial ministries and research organizations on arrangements to share information on research and COVID-19 programs, as well as to

improve First Nations health data held by provinces through data linkages, and for related research.

Advancing Co-development and Indigenous Data Governance Capacity

The Government of Canada continues to work with partners to advance First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation data governance capacity to ensure that Indigenous governments and organizations have the data they need to not only manage the COVID-19 crisis (and future crises), but also support action to close socio-economic gaps in the longer term.

Through Budget 2021, the Government of Canada has proposed additional investments of \$73.5 million over three years, to advance federal support for the development and implementation of a First Nations Data Governance Strategy.⁹ It also proposes \$8 million over three years to support Inuit and Métis baseline data capacity as well as the development of distinctions-based Inuit and Métis Nation data strategies.

This work will build on a number of earlier achievements. For First Nations, Budget 2018 provided \$2.5 million for the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) to develop a National First Nations Data Governance Strategy, which was completed in March 2020. The department provided the FNIGC with additional resources in 2020/21 to continue to develop their vision for a *“First Nations-led, national network of modern information and statistical service centres at national and regional levels, to serve the data capacity needs of communities and Nations and to advance the realization of data sovereignty that is in alignment with First Nations’ distinct worldviews.”*¹⁰

A key deliverable in Indigenous Services Canada’s departmental data strategy is the co-development of distinctions-based approaches to engaging with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation peoples on data-related matters, including how to further support the development of the data governance capacity they will need to fully realize their respective visions for self-determination. As an initial step, a Table on First Nations Data was established in 2020. It includes the Assembly of First Nations, the First Nations Information Governance Centre, as well as Statistics Canada and ISC. Initial discussions are currently underway regarding establishing similar Tables with Inuit and the Métis Nation.

The department supports the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation co-led working group on COVID data and modelling and also participates in the Assembly of First Nations COVID-19 Data Working group and the Indigenous Advisory Circle of the COVID-19 Immunity Task Force. The goal of these groups is to bring together university, hospital and public health expertise to map the scope of COVID-19 in Canada.

Recognizing the vital work being done by partners, the department continues to support

the work of the First Nations Information Governance Centre to conduct First Nations-led, national surveys on reserve and in northern First Nations, in compliance with the First Nations Principles of OCAP® (ownership, control, access, and possession). These include:

- The First Nations Regional Health Survey; and
- The First Nations Regional Social Survey, which covers First Nations living on reserve.

To support Inuit data improvements, the Government of Canada is supporting the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami to lead the permanent *Qanuippitaa?* National Inuit Health Survey. Funding is being used to build capacity in Inuit communities to develop and collect survey information and support Inuit self-determination in setting the research agenda in their regions and communities. Indigenous Services Canada will continue to support the vision, as stated in the National Inuit Strategy on Research released in 2018, for *“research producing new knowledge that empowers our people in meeting the needs and priorities of our families and communities. We see achieving self-determination in research as the means for ensuring that research governance bodies, policies, and practices are consistent with this vision.”*¹¹

The Government of Canada is also supporting the Métis Nation in gathering health data and developing a health strategy. Data development and governance continue to be highlighted in the context of ongoing work between the federal government and Métis Nation to advance Métis Nation self-determination and well-being.

The National Outcome-Based Framework represents another important co-development effort in the data domain. Since 2016, as part of the New Fiscal Relationship, the Assembly of First Nations and Indigenous Services Canada have been working together to co-develop a National Outcomes-Based Framework to measure the closure of socio-economic gaps between First Nations and non-Indigenous Canadians. The framework is intended to be a key mechanism of mutual accountability to ensure the new fiscal relationship is delivering results by measuring progress in closing wellbeing gaps between First Nations and non-Indigenous Canadians.

In addition to supporting the advancement of Indigenous government and organization data capacity, Indigenous Services Canada is working with its federal partners on solutions to further address its own gaps in Indigenous data.

In partnership with Statistics Canada, the department has established an Interdepartmental Collaborative Committee on Indigenous Data. The Committee provides a forum to engage with other departments on subjects related to the development, collection, management and use of Indigenous data in the Federal Public Service in support of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, improving service delivery to Indigenous individuals and communities, and advancing self-determination of

Indigenous Peoples. It seeks to achieve consistency in definition, practice, and methodology in Indigenous data. The Committee also provides opportunities to Indigenous organizations to engage with the federal government on Indigenous data.

This interdepartmental effort includes working with Statistics Canada on improving coverage and representativeness of Indigenous Peoples in national data collection activities. The department currently supports oversampling of Indigenous populations in Statistics Canada's surveys such as Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies and the General Social Survey or the National Legal Problems Survey. In addition, the department supports the data collection for the off-reserve and urban Indigenous population through the Indigenous People Survey. One objective of the new interdepartmental committee is to ensure the complementarity of these different data collection efforts so that they maximize the availability of key, distinctions-based data without increasing respondent burden on Indigenous participants.

Moving forward, the Government of Canada remains committed to taking the steps necessary to address gaps in Indigenous data. It also remains committed to supporting Indigenous governments and organizations to increase their ability to collect, analyze and shape data into meaningful policies and services for their peoples. What's more, these initiatives and investments will help provide Indigenous governments and organizations with a foundation for success as Indigenous Services Canada pursues its mandate of gradual transfer of service delivery responsibilities to Indigenous control. This work moves forward in the spirit of advancing reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples while building a nation-to-nation, Inuit-to-Crown, and government-to-government relationship based on recognition of rights, respect, cooperation and the right of self-determination.

Part 4: Indigenous Peoples in Canada, COVID-19 and Socio-economic Gaps

In early 2020, the first COVID-19 cases were detected in Canada and interrupted work, school, and the daily living of Canadians throughout the country. While the body of knowledge and breadth of experience in detecting, treating, and controlling this virus have grown exponentially since that time, there remain unanswered questions and considerable gaps in both data and knowledge relating to the virus. In addition to the impacts of COVID-19 on health, understanding the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on labour force participation and income, access to education, and personal safety has become essential in order to support Canadians as the pandemic continues. It is still unknown how the disruption of social determinants of overall health (access to health services, social and cultural interaction, education potential) will affect the Canadian population. Understanding outcomes for Indigenous Peoples has been especially challenging due to the lack of data being collected in which Indigenous identities are captured or where Indigenous communities are actively included in data collection efforts.

The department recognizes that the body of work and research is still evolving. The following sections provide a review of the information available for Indigenous Peoples in Canada regarding rates of infection, hospitalization, and death resulting from COVID-19, as well as lasting health outcomes associated with the virus. It also covers the impact that COVID-19 has had on the economy, education and safety.

Rate of infection, hospitalization, and death resulting from COVID-19

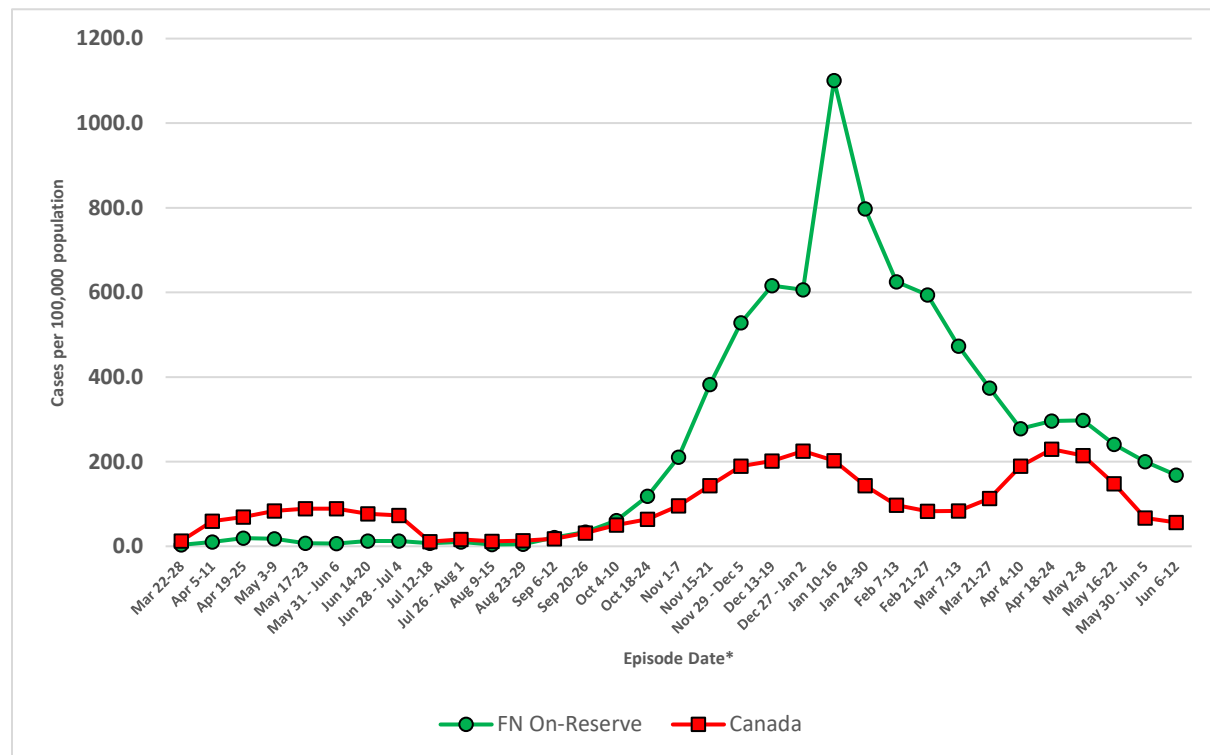
Owing to data limitations that will be discussed in a subsequent section, national level data is limited to reporting from First Nations and Inuit communities in the provinces and data including Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the territories.

As of July 2021, the rate of total cases of COVID-19 in Canada has exceeded 3,700 per 100,000 population.¹² Furthermore, over 1.4 million Canadians have tested positive for COVID-19, more than 79,000 people were hospitalized and more than 26,000 have died.^{13,14} From the data collected by Indigenous Services Canada, First Nations communities have recorded more than 32,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, more than 1,500 hospitalizations and more than 360 COVID-19 related deaths.¹⁵ The bulk of cases reported to the department from First Nations communities can be attributed to Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.¹⁶

When compared to the general Canadian population, First Nations have reported higher death rates proportionally to their size. As of July 6, 2021, the crude mortality rate was about 80 per 100,000, while in the general Canadian population it was about 70 per 100,000. Among the individuals infected with the virus, the case fatality ratio (a proportion of deceased cases among all reported cases) in First Nations living on reserve was about two-thirds that of the general Canadian population.¹⁷

As seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the majority of cases within First Nations have occurred during the second wave of the pandemic (between November 2020 and July 2021) with a large increase in late December 2020 to mid-January 2021. However, due to careful management, leadership and place-based knowledge of First Nation community leaders, and the strong emphasis on promoting immunizations among community members, the majority of First Nations were able to bring the second wave of the pandemic under control.¹⁸ Since peaking in mid-January 2021 at around 5,000 active cases, the count of active cases has dropped to less than 500 cases in the first week of July – a decrease of more than 90%. At the same time, the count of vaccine doses administered has increased from 30,000 to more than 470,000, a more than 15-fold increase.

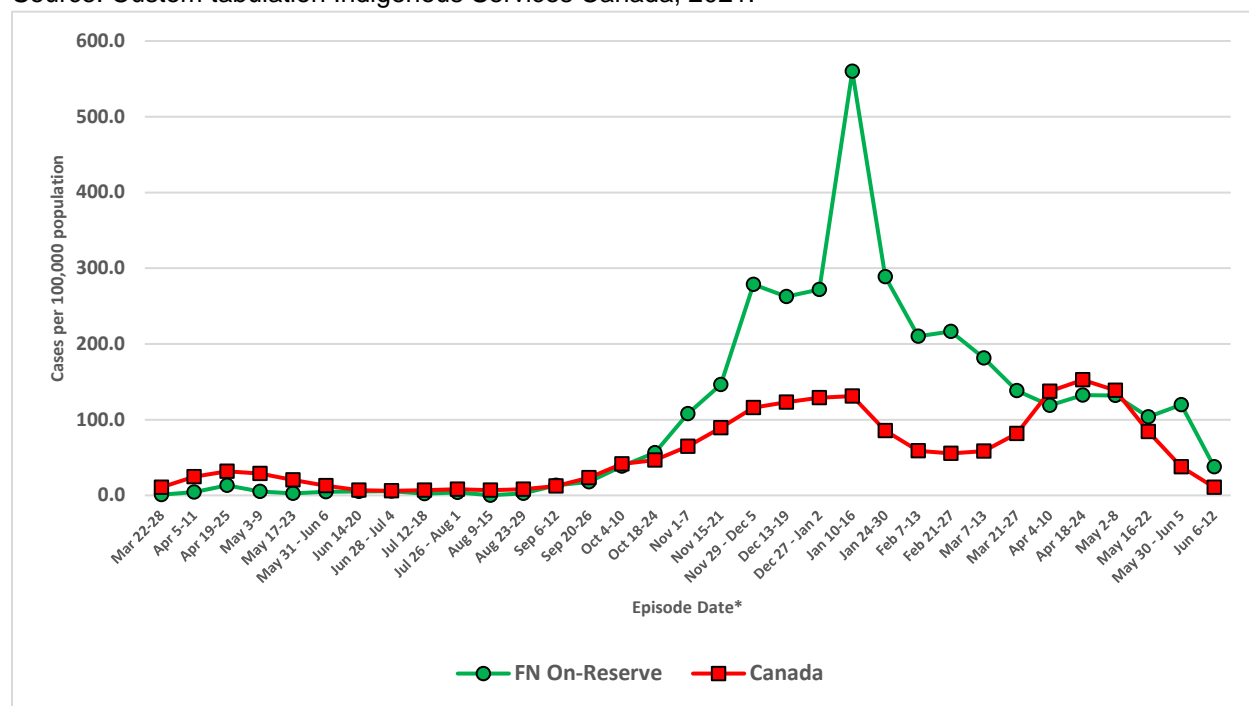
Figure 1. Comparison of the rate of active COVID-19 cases per 100,000 in First Nations and in the general Canadian population by episode date, April 2020 - July 2021.



Source: Custom tabulation Indigenous Services Canada, 2021.

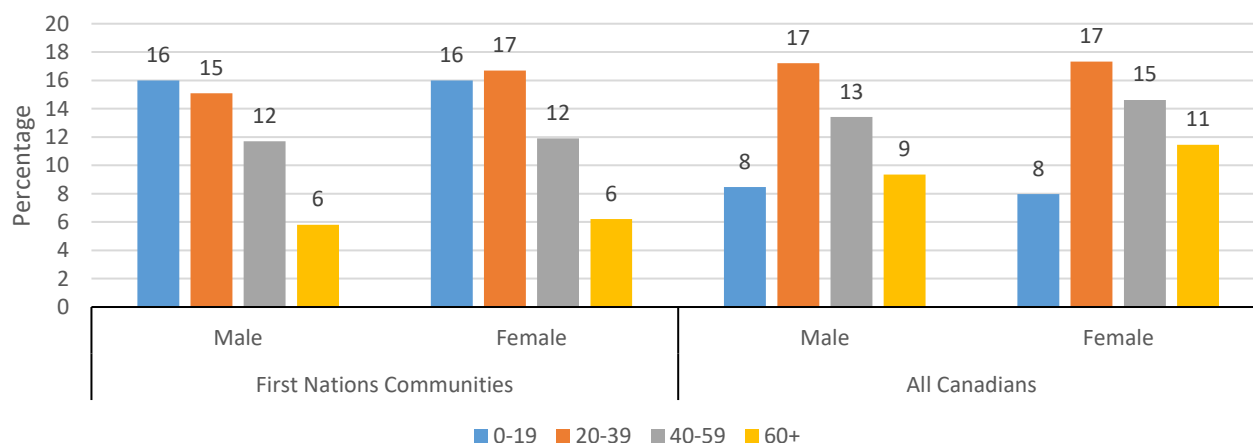
Figure 2. Comparison of the rate of newly reported COVID-19 cases per 100,000 in First Nations and in the general Canadian population by episode date, April 2020 - July 2021.

Source: Custom tabulation Indigenous Services Canada, 2021.



As seen in Figure 3, more women have tested positive for COVID-19 amongst all Canadians and within First Nations. The proportion of COVID-19 cases in First Nations that are associated with youths (age 0-19) is almost double the proportion seen in the general Canadian population, although this may be due to differences in age distribution amongst the populations. Older First Nation community members accounted for a smaller proportion of COVID-19 cases. Adults aged 20-39 account for roughly one-third of all COVID-19 cases within First Nations. These differences in proportions may also be the result of noted differences in testing practices and differences in the population structure of on-reserve populations. For example, in some First Nations broad asymptomatic testing was performed during outbreaks. This increased testing may have identified more low/no symptom cases¹⁹ and helped identify new previously undiagnosed COVID-19 cases particularly among the First Nations youth population. Before the introduction of vaccines, there was a strong association between older age and mortality outcomes from COVID-19. Older adults were also more likely to be hospitalized. These risks used to increase with each decade of life after age 60.²⁰ Early and increasing roll out of immunizations in First Nations, Inuit and Territorial communities has reduced the number of active cases overall, and among older Indigenous people in particular. It has also led to decreased hospitalizations and deaths in these age groups. With COVID-19 variants of concern taking hold in communities across Canada, considerably younger Indigenous people are becoming diagnosed and require hospitalization due to COVID-19.

Figure 3. Percentage of positive COVID-19 cases in First Nations by age group and sex compared to all cases in Canada, 2020.



Source: Custom tabulation Indigenous Services Canada, 2021.^{21,22}

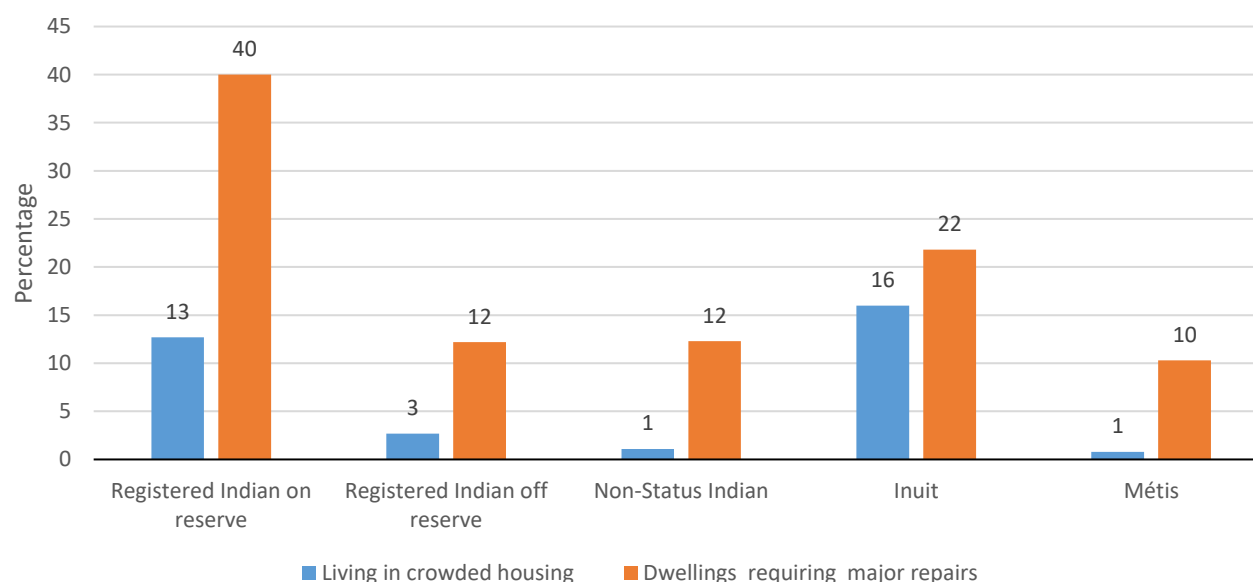
COVID-19 and Health

As noted in reviews of the COVID-19 literature to date, Indigenous individuals are at particular risk from the current pandemic.^{23,24} While anyone can become infected with COVID-19, some may be at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 or of developing severe infection than others due to their health, occupational, social, economic and life circumstances.²⁵ In particular, older adults (those 60 years of age and older) have been found to be at increased risk for severe COVID-19 health outcomes.²⁶ The risk of potentially being exposed to COVID-19 is greater for those residing in group settings where the COVID-19 virus may transmit more easily (for example, long-term care facilities, correctional facilities, shelters, overcrowded housing, or group residences). There is also greater risk for exposure to COVID-19 amongst those who face barriers that limit their ability to access or implement effective public health measures (for example, individuals with disabilities who encounter non-accessible information, services and/or facilities).²⁷ Additionally, concerns have been raised regarding worksites and COVID-19, particularly for Indigenous communities, where community members or visitors may acquire COVID-19 at a worksite outside of the community and then inadvertently transmit the virus in a First Nation they are visiting, or introduce the virus in their household.²⁸ Within Inuit Nunangat, many Inuit workers were not able to work at mine sites during the pandemic, in order to prevent transmission and protect communities.

Indigenous individuals in Canada are at increased risk of COVID-19 severe health outcomes for a number of reasons relating to systemic barriers and structural inequalities rooted in colonization and continuous societal and institutional racism.²⁹ Structural factors such as increased levels of poverty, substandard living conditions, food insecurity and lack of access to clean drinking water place Indigenous communities at increased risk of COVID-19 transmission.^{30,31,32, 33} Increased housing density or

overcrowding is a further impediment to following public health guidance on social distancing and self-isolating when sick which can contribute to increased risk of COVID-19 transmission amongst Indigenous people.³⁴ Almost one-quarter of First Nation people living on reserve (25%) and Inuit in Nunangat (24%) reside in multigenerational households compared to 6% in the non-Indigenous population.³⁵ This living arrangement puts Elders and seniors at increased risk of severe health outcomes if infected with COVID-19.³⁶ While these issues pre-date COVID-19, the pandemic has further exacerbated these structural inequalities. In addition to crowding, many Indigenous people reside in housing requiring major repairs, as seen in Figure 4. The physical condition and quality of a home can also be associated with an increased risk of COVID-19 transmission.³⁷ For remote and isolated communities, the need to bring in specially-trained repair workers means the choice between delaying essential repair work or the risk of increasing COVID-19 exposure by flying in skilled workers from more populated areas.³⁸

Figure 4. Percentage of Indigenous housing deemed crowded or in need of major repair, Canada, 2016.



Source: Custom tabulation Indigenous Services Canada, 2021.³⁹

Furthermore, Indigenous individuals are more likely to report having an underlying health condition (44%) than the non-Indigenous population (38%).⁴⁰ Those living off reserve and who identified as First Nation (48%) were most likely to report having underlying health conditions, while those identifying as Métis (41%) or Inuit (38%) were less likely to report this.⁴¹ Similarly, First Nation individuals also have higher rates of diabetes,⁴² heart disease,⁴³ and respiratory illnesses.^{44,45} These medical conditions are associated with increased risk of severe COVID-19 symptoms and increased risk for poor health outcomes.⁴⁶ Amongst Inuit, tuberculosis rates remain persistently high,

individuals with active tuberculosis and COVID-19 may have poorer outcomes.⁴⁷ Additionally, crowdsourced data has shown that the majority (57%) of Indigenous participants with disabilities or long-term conditions reported that their current overall state of health was substantially worse compared to that pre-pandemic.⁴⁸

Amongst urban populations, Indigenous individuals face increased risks of COVID-19 transmission linked to factors such as their overrepresentation in populations who experience homelessness,^{49,50,51,52,53,54} incarceration,^{55,56,57,58,59,60,61} and poverty.⁶² To that point, 24% of Indigenous people living in urban areas live below the poverty line.⁶³ Increased rates of poverty amongst Indigenous individuals extend beyond urban settings, as almost half (47%) of Indigenous children in Canada live in poverty (47% for First Nation children, 25% for Inuit children and 22% for Métis children).⁶⁴ Children living on reserve (53%) were more likely to live in poverty than those living off reserve (41%) and non-racialized, non-Indigenous children (12%).⁶⁵

Indigenous people have experienced long-standing and persistent barriers in accessing equitable and culturally-safe healthcare services,^{66,67,68,69,70} particularly those in remote or isolated communities.⁷¹ The healthcare systems in Canada's more remote and isolated locations, particularly in the North, are largely insufficient to handle a pandemic on the scale of COVID-19.⁷² For example, 82% of Inuit in Inuit Nunangat reported that they did not have a family doctor as compared to 19% of the First Nation population living off reserve, 16% of the self-identified Métis population and 15% of non-Indigenous Canadians who do not have a family doctor.^{73,74} Travelling outside of community to seek medical care also increases the risks of contracting COVID-19. For example, there are documented cases of COVID-19 acquisition and death as a result of seeking perinatal care outside of the community.⁷⁵

Health providers are adapting to physical distancing measures and often moving care to virtual appointments where appropriate. Virtual care facilitates access to care while reducing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 by minimizing the need to travel in and out of communities. Challenges with scheduling can be minimized through the use of virtual care by allowing more flexibility in hours of service. The persistent connectivity issues in many Indigenous communities provide a barrier to utilizing virtual care models.⁷⁶ Slower internet speeds and latency (the time it takes for a signal to reach its destination) can also delay transfer of medical documents (Ex. X-rays).⁷⁵ To take full advantage of the opportunities to implement virtual care models, faster internet speeds would be needed to enhance capacity for downloading and uploading⁷⁵ and additional equipment and infrastructure would be needed to enable greater access to high speed internet.

Beyond the challenges of physically being able to see a medical professional, Indigenous individuals face stigma and racism within the healthcare system.^{77,78} These experiences within the healthcare system have consistently been associated with negative health outcomes.⁷⁹ Those who fear stigmatization may delay seeking help until later stages of the disease or symptoms worsen to an unmanageable level.^{80,81}

Indigenous people may be further stigmatized via the racist (including discriminatory) interpersonal behaviours of health professionals and/or their Eurocentric medical training which devalues traditional Indigenous medicine and knowledge.^{82,83} The lack of access to culturally-appropriate, timely and routine healthcare for Indigenous individuals has been associated with negative health outcomes.⁸⁴

COVID-19 and Mental Health

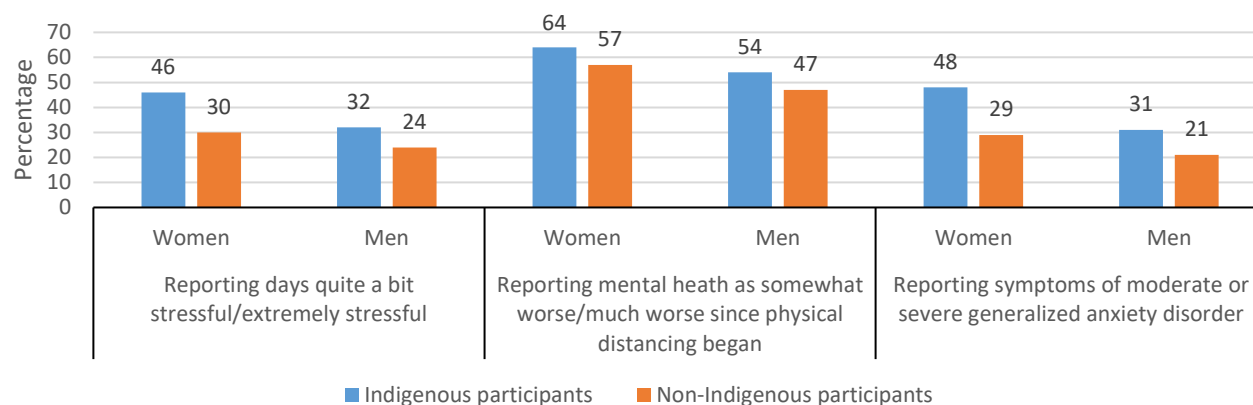
The pandemic has taken a significant toll on Canadians' social and mental wellbeing. During the pandemic, Canadians reported their lowest levels of life satisfaction since data became available in 2003.⁸⁵ Only 43% of Canadians rated their life satisfaction at eight or higher on a 10 point-scale as compared with 73% of Canadians in 2018.⁸⁶ Data indicate that fewer Canadians reported being in very good or excellent mental health, with young Canadians registering the largest declines.

In response to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic, Statistics Canada conducted a series of crowdsourced surveys to assess the impact of COVID-19 on Canadians. While the publically available data do include an Indigenous indicator, it does not allow for a distinctions-based analysis of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis data.⁸⁷ Indigenous respondents reported overall lower levels of perceived mental health than their non-Indigenous counterparts, with 64% of Indigenous respondents reporting their current perceived mental state as good, very good, or excellent compared to 73% of non-Indigenous respondents.⁸⁸

As seen in Figure 5, reports of worsening mental health are particularly high amongst Indigenous respondents. Compared to Indigenous men, Indigenous women were more likely to report having their mental health impacted since the start of physical distancing with 46% reporting that their days are quite a bit or extremely stressful and 48% reporting symptoms consistent with moderate or severe generalized anxiety disorder.⁸⁹

Furthermore, a study by the Canadian Mental Health Association looked at the ongoing mental health impacts of the second wave of the pandemic and found that 40% of Canadians' mental health deteriorated since the onset of the pandemic. Indigenous people were more likely to report worsening mental health during the second wave (54%) compared to the first wave (41%) of the pandemic. Almost half (48%) of Canadians reported experiencing anxiety or worry about the pandemic and more than a third (38%) reported experiencing stress related to COVID-19. Of concern, reports of suicidal thoughts or feelings were higher during the second wave (20%) for Indigenous respondents than in the first (16%). Higher substance use as a coping strategy was also reported by Indigenous respondents: 29% reported increasing their alcohol use, and 24% reported increasing their cannabis use as compared to 20% and 9% respectively amongst all survey participants.⁹⁰

Figure 5. Mental health impacts since the start of the pandemic, Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants by gender, Canada, April 24 to May 11, 2020.



Source: Statistics Canada, 2020.⁹¹

Social Isolation

Statistics Canada's crowdsourced survey on the impact of COVID-19 on mental health during the first wave of the pandemic identified that Indigenous respondents were more likely to report that their mental health had been negatively impacted since the beginning of physical distancing measures, with 63% of Indigenous respondents indicating their mental health was somewhat or much worse at the time of the survey. Non-Indigenous respondents were slightly less likely to report negative impacts (57%). Almost half (47%) of Indigenous women reported being very or extremely concerned about family stress due to confinement.^{92,93}

Given the nature of the crowdsourced data collection method, it is not possible to explore data beyond the provincial/territorial level. For example, it is unclear how more remote communities, especially isolated Indigenous communities, have responded to social isolation and physical distancing measures. During the first wave of the pandemic, many Indigenous communities closed themselves off to outsiders to prevent COVID-19 transmission into their community.⁹⁴ Data have not been collected on how these community closures impacted residents' mental health during or after the closure period. Physical distancing has also limited how many Indigenous individuals are able to engage and participate in their traditional customs and practices including limiting attendance for funerary services.⁹⁵

COVID-19 and the Economy

Labour Force

COVID-19 has worsened the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals in the labour market, specifically among Indigenous women and youth. From February 2020 to May 2020, the unemployment rate among Indigenous people living off reserve increased to 17% (increasing almost seven percentage points). By comparison, non-Indigenous Canadians saw a six per cent increase to 12%. However, from June to August 2020, the unemployment rate amongst Indigenous people remained relatively unchanged (17%) while the rate among non-Indigenous people declined to 11%. During this same time, the number of employed Indigenous women living off reserve fell to 88% of its pre-pandemic level; in comparison, this proportion was 93% among non-Indigenous women. Finally, the unemployment rate among Indigenous youth aged 15 to 24 years living off-reserve was 26% in the three months ending in August 2020, an increase of 11% percentage points from the same period in 2019; this was the largest increase among all age groups.⁹⁶

The Métis Nation labour force was particularly hard hit by the pandemic. Close to eight per cent of Métis workers lost their employment during the first two-quarters of the pandemic from March to August 2020, the highest portion of workers losing jobs compared to both the Indigenous (7.5%) and non-Indigenous populations (4.8%).⁹⁷

Impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous Business

Indigenous businesses are facing an unprecedented crisis due to COVID-19. According to an Indigenous Business Survey conducted by the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, the vast majority (91%) of Indigenous businesses reported that they have experienced a negative impact on their operations from COVID-19. Additionally, over two-thirds (67%) of Indigenous businesses saw a decrease in revenues from January 2020 to March 2020, when compared to revenues earned from the same period in 2019. Inuit-owned businesses (38%) were most likely to have experienced a revenue drop of 50% or more, compared to 27% of Métis and 31% of First Nations. Finally, 60% of respondents with businesses outside of their community predicted their business would not last more than six months, compared to 48% of businesses located inside the owner's community; First Nation business owners were most likely to report a business survival rate of less than one month (12%), compared to seven per cent of Métis and three per cent of Inuit-owned businesses.⁹⁸

Ability to meet financial obligations

In a crowdsourced survey conducted by Statistics Canada, 37% of Indigenous respondents experienced job loss or reduced work hours, compared to 35% of non-Indigenous participants. Furthermore, 36% of Indigenous respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had a strong or moderate impact on their ability to meet financial obligations or essential needs, such as rent or mortgage payments, utilities, and groceries compared to 25% among non-Indigenous participants. Additionally, relatively fewer Indigenous individuals accessed pandemic benefits than the non-Indigenous population: among Indigenous participants who reported a strong or moderate financial impact of COVID-19, 44% applied for federal income support, compared to 50% of non-Indigenous participants. In both cases, approximately 95% of participants received that support.⁹⁹ As a result of the ongoing financial difficulties many are facing, other socio-economic challenges such as homelessness and food insecurity have also been negatively impacted by the pandemic.^{100,101}

Challenges experienced by those with disabilities or long-term conditions have likely worsened in the COVID-19 context. More Indigenous than non-Indigenous participants with disabilities or long-term conditions reported a 'moderate' or 'major' impact on their ability to meet essential needs since the pandemic started. Over half of Indigenous participants reported a 'moderate' or 'major' impact on their ability to meet their food and grocery needs (54%) and their personal protective equipment needs (52%). In comparison, these proportions were, respectively, 41% and 37% of non-Indigenous participants.¹⁰²

COVID-19 and Education

In many regions in Canada, elementary and secondary schools have been closed and/or moved to online learning models for all or part of the past two school years, although the timing and duration of these changes have varied regionally. While school closures and remote learning has been difficult for many parents, those in Indigenous communities face additional challenges. For example, many of the teachers residing in Inuit Nunangat opted to return to their homes in southern Canada during the first wave of the pandemic, leaving a lack of educators in the region.¹⁰³ While the impacts of these closures on both parents and children are beginning to be examined, there are presently no Indigenous-specific data available.

Barriers to Virtual Learning

The movement to virtual learning at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels presents a challenge for many Indigenous students given limited connectivity. Video streaming, such as for participating in virtual learning, requires 50/10 speeds.¹⁰⁴ However, only 24% of households in Indigenous communities have access to 50/10

Mbps compared to 84% of all Canadian households.¹⁰⁵ Many Indigenous communities are often limited to satellite internet service as broadband internet access is limited to more urban areas. Furthermore, while the majority of Canadians have some access to mobile service at home the quality of the coverage is spotty and unreliable in many areas.¹⁰⁶ Even in areas where internet service is readily available, children in lower-income homes were less likely to be able to access it (4%) than those in high-income households (0.2%).¹⁰⁷ Given the remote or isolated nature of many Indigenous communities, they are disproportionately affected by these connectivity barriers.

COVID-19 and Safety

Despite reductions in certain crimes,¹⁰⁸ a crowdsourced survey revealed people's perceptions around crime remained relatively unchanged. Indigenous respondents were twice as likely (22%) to report they felt people in their neighbourhood were being harassed or attacked often or sometimes due to their race, ethnicity or skin colour as compared to non-Indigenous participants (11%).¹⁰⁹ Amongst Indigenous respondents to the crowdsourced survey on Perceptions of Safety and COVID-19, 17% reported that they believe crime has increased in their neighbourhood since the start of the pandemic, compared to 11% among non-Indigenous participants.¹¹⁰ Indigenous women were only half (24%) as likely to report feeling very safe when walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark, compared with Indigenous men (43%), consistent with the findings from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.^{111,112} Experiences with Indigeneity, colonialism, gender and violence intersect to make Indigenous women amongst the most vulnerable members of Canadian society.¹¹³ Unfortunately, the pandemic has increased rates of victimization among Indigenous Peoples.¹¹⁴

Intimate Partner Violence

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened conditions of social isolation, loss of employment and reduced income which are all associated with increased risk for intimate partner and family violence.^{115,116,117} Calls to police for domestic disturbances increased by 12% during the first four months of the pandemic.¹¹⁸ Calls to police for domestic violence during the pandemic peaked in July 2020. Similarly, over one-half of victim services agencies reported an increase in the number of victims of intimate partner violence between mid-March and early July.¹¹⁹ Given Indigenous women are overrepresented in residential facilities for survivors of abuse (documented at five times higher than their representation in the Canadian population)¹²⁰ the increased risk of intimate partner violence is of particular concern for Indigenous women. Rates of intimate partner violence in Inuit Nunangat are amongst the highest in Canada, which are further compounded by the inadequate number of shelters, crisis centres, and transition homes in the region.¹²¹ A survey by the Native Women's Association of Canada found that Indigenous women most vulnerable to violence during the first

months of the pandemic resided in the North, were under 35 years of age, and had been financially impacted by COVID-19.¹²²

The crowdsourced mental health survey found that of all respondents surveyed, 10% of women and 6% of men reported that they were concerned about the possibility of violence in the home.¹²³ Moreover, Indigenous respondents were twice as likely to be concerned about violence in the home with almost one in ten Indigenous respondents (9%) indicating they were somewhat, very, or extremely concerned. Although fewer respondents overall reported being very or extremely concerned about violence in the home, Indigenous respondents were still twice as likely to be concerned (2%) than their non-Indigenous counterparts (1%).¹²⁴ Overall, 13% of Indigenous women reported some level of concern (somewhat/very/extremely) about violence in their home.¹²⁵

Surveys of Canadian women's shelters found that Indigenous women were at increased risk of violence in the home as many reported they were unable to secure safe transportation to reach a shelter, leaving them trapped in their isolated communities.¹²⁶ While most facilities (89%) continue to provide outreach services to women unable to access the shelters as more of these services became virtual, women residing in many rural and remote areas, especially Indigenous women, were challenged by bandwidth, Wi-Fi, and cell reception limitation. The reductions in staff and services have created additional challenges to providing traditional and cultural supports to Indigenous survivors.^{127,128}

COVID-19 and Resiliency

COVID-19 and the related public health measures have had a profound and disproportionate effect on many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis in Canada and affected many aspects of day-to-day life. Hardship is not new to Indigenous Peoples; generations have suffered trauma and discrimination from colonialism. Despite this constant struggle, Indigenous individuals have forged a robust sense of community, strong Indigenous leaders, and a profound sense of interconnectedness.¹²⁹ Indigenous Peoples and communities continue to display great resilience and adaptability in the face of a global pandemic. Research has found evidence that many Indigenous communities have inherent protective factors such as strong community ties, Indigenous knowledge and practices, community-centered communication, community-driven and controlled health measures, and a commitment to caring for each other, especially to protect community Elders.¹³⁰ Indigenous governments and leadership have shown effective and timely responses to the pandemic such as with their ability to respond immediately to the needs of the community, and the closures of most First Nations communities, which spared many from the first wave of the pandemic.¹³¹

Communities have moved many of their cultural practices online and have found new ways to connect virtually.^{132,133} With the need to physically distance to reduce COVID-19 transmission, many Indigenous communities are looking at new tools and methods

to share and connect with each other.^{134,135} Many Indigenous youth have turned to social media platforms as a means of connecting, as can be seen in the TikTok-based #PassTheBrush challenge.^{136,137} Some communities have increased their ability to connect with each other through virtual beading circles or filming cultural practices like jingle dress dances for sharing on YouTube.¹³⁸ Traditional practices such as tobacco use,¹³⁹ food sharing¹⁴⁰ and funerary services¹⁴¹ have been reexamined and adapted for increased safety during the pandemic. Resources have been developed to help guide Indigenous parents and adapt teachings and traditions to life with physical distancing.¹⁴² Reliance on or return to traditional knowledge and practices may offer increased supports during these trying times. For example, traditional Indigenous kinship practices around childrearing encourage children's integration in daily living.¹⁴³ This integrated perspective may prove protective for families trying to maintain or find balance between increasing demands of work and home life. Furthermore, traditional teachings and practices may provide respite and comfort to children during these challenging times.¹⁴⁴

Conclusion

The last year has been filled with many unforeseen challenges that affected all Canadians. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has shone an especially bright light on the needs and issues facing Indigenous Peoples in Canada. While the limited available data has clearly shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the Indigenous population, it has also shown the resiliency of Indigenous communities and their leadership. Furthermore, it highlights the strengths and benefits of having Indigenous partners and voices at decision-making tables. Pandemic response measures like the Indigenous Community Support Fund have also forced the Government of Canada to rethink its approach and possible solutions to meeting those needs.

These events emphasize that a fundamental shift is required to fully realize ISC's legislated mandate of closing socio-economic gaps and gradually transferring responsibilities to Indigenous control. Ultimately, this mandate is about recognizing and affirming Indigenous Peoples' inherent right to self-determination. It is essential that work to meet this mandate respects the distinct needs and preferences of First Nations, Inuit, the Métis Nation and their citizens, and that it upholds treaty and Aboriginal rights, and federal obligations.

Indigenous Services Canada will continue to work with Indigenous partners on refining and increasing Indigenous access to quality services that are essential to closing socio-economic gaps. The department will do this by using co-developed initiatives that build community capacity and speak directly to the unique needs of the service users as we actively work towards the shared objective of transferring the full responsibility of design and delivery of culturally appropriate services to Indigenous control. The department also acknowledges the importance of strong data to help guide development processes. Indigenous Services Canada is committed to supporting our Indigenous partners to work with Provinces and Territories to improve the collection, monitoring and analysis of First Nations, Inuit and Métis data so that they can be shaped into meaningful policies and services for their peoples.

Achieving progress on transfer, as well as closing socio-economic gaps, will require continued investments to ensure future sustainability. Experience has shown that investing in services where Indigenous governments and organizations played a key role in their design and delivery leads to better outcomes for Indigenous individuals and Peoples. Supporting self-determination, we can have a positive impact on closing of socio-economic gaps between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous people in Canada.

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- ¹ More specifically, The Act states that the overall objective of the government of Canada is to achieve reconciliation with First Nations, the Métis and the Inuit through renewed nation-to-nation, government-to-government and Inuit-Crown relationships; to promote respect for the rights of Indigenous peoples; and, to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Services will contribute to this objective in five ways: i) ensuring that Indigenous individuals have access — in accordance with transparent service standards and the needs of each Indigenous group, community or people — to services for which those individuals are eligible; ii) taking into account socio-economic gaps that persist between Indigenous individuals and other Canadians with respect to a range of matters as well as social factors having an impact on health and well-being; iii) recognizing and promoting Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing; iv) collaborating and cooperating with Indigenous peoples and with the provinces and territories; and, v) implementing the gradual transfer of departmental responsibilities to Indigenous organizations.
- ² Urban, Rural and Northern Indigenous Housing (<https://www.pbo-dpb.gc.ca/en/blog/news/RP-2021-039-C--urban-rural-northern-indigenous-housing--logement-autochtones-vivant-en-milieu-urbain-rural-nordique>)
- ³ Clean Water for First Nations: Is the Government Spending Enough? (<https://distribution-a617274656661637473.pbo-dpb.ca/8544c3674361c171dbaded06eaff8c5261695d58b608cbc5505f521aaab326fb>)
- ⁴ P3's: Bridging the First Nations Infrastructure Gap (https://www.pppcouncil.ca/web/P3_Knowledge_Centre/Research/P3_s_Bridging_the_First_Nations_Infrastructure_Gap.aspx?WebsiteKey=712ad751-6689-4d4a-aa17-e9f993740a89)
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- ⁶ The 'Federal Pathway' is the term for the Government of Canada's contribution to the National Action Plan.
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