

# An urban Aboriginal life:

## The 2005 indicators report on the quality of life of Aboriginal people living in the Greater Vancouver region

**Nathan Cardinal**, a researcher with the Centre for Native Policy and Research and author of *An Urban Aboriginal Life*, reports on the study's process, findings, and recommendations for action and further research.

WHILE THE MAJORITY OF CANADIANS enjoy one of the highest levels of quality of life in the world, the situation is radically different for Canada's Aboriginal population. In 2003, Canada ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in the United Nations' Human Development Index. However, if this ranking were recalculated solely for Registered Indians in Canada, this ranking would drop to 48<sup>th</sup>, just above Cuba and the Bahamas.

In order to document the social, economic, and environmental conditions of Aboriginal people living in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD), a series of indicators relevant to the Aboriginal community were identified and evaluated by the Centre for Native Policy and Research (CNPR). While a significant trend exists that shows a migration of Aboriginal people to urban areas—with over 57% of all Aboriginal people now living in urban areas—little general information is available about this segment of the Aboriginal population. The information gathered for these indicators attempts to fill this gap in understanding by providing a comprehensive assessment of the quality of life of the Greater Vancouver region's urban Aboriginal population.

### Indicators: a social measure

The CNPR's recent report, *An Urban Aboriginal Life: the 2005 Indicators Report on the Quality of Life of Aboriginal People Living in the Greater Vancouver Region*, documents the present social, economic, and environmental condition of Aboriginal people living in the GVRD. Further the report acts as a benchmark for future studies, highlight gaps in data, and provides recommendations regarding future data gathering, research, and policy development.

The suite of indicators chosen were selected to provide a comprehensive snapshot of the present social, economic, and environmental conditions of Aboriginal people living in the GVRD, as well as highlight gaps in available data and provide recommendations for future research and policy development. The medicine wheel, a holistic expression of the Aboriginal worldview, was used as a framework to determine categories and indicators for each of the four traditional directions: north, south, east, and west. At the core of the framework are both the elements and goals of a sustainable city: healthy people,

*continued on page 26*

*continued from page 25*

healthy nation, and healthy land—society, economy, and environment. Advice from discussions with Aboriginal community members and professionals, as well as a comprehensive literature

**“The medicine wheel, a holistic expression of the Aboriginal worldview, was used as a framework to determine categories and indicators for each of the four traditional directions: north, south, east, and west. At the core of the framework are both the elements and goals of a sustainable city: healthy people, healthy nation, and healthy land—society, economy, and environment.”**

review, was used in selecting categories and indicators for the project. The scope of the report is limited to the Aboriginal (First Nation, Metis, and Inuit) population living within the jurisdictional boundaries of the GVRD. In total, 33 different indicators were selected in 12 different categories in the four traditional directions.

Data for each indicator were gathered and standardized as much as possible for each indicator to allow comparisons on various levels, including comparisons over time, between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in the GVRD, and between the Aboriginal population in the GVRD and the total Aboriginal population of B.C. Indicators were analyzed and rated according to one of four categories: strong, improving/fair, deteriorating/weak, or poor.

**Disparities, inequality indicated**

The indicator analysis revealed poor social conditions among the Aboriginal community in the GVRD, with significant disparities between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. Health conditions for Aboriginal people lagged behind the non-Aboriginal community. Cultural activities and language fluency were weak or deteriorating, and conditions for the Aboriginal family were also poor. Incarceration rates for Aboriginal people revealed a discouraging level of overrepresentation of Aboriginal people among convicted offenders. However, such dark clouds have a

silver lining: high school attainment rates are improving in the region, and there are positive signs of language rejuvenation among Aboriginal children.

Economic indicators showed pronounced levels of inequality between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population in the GVRD, but showed signs of improvement. While employment rates were weak, there were positive developments in the proportion of Aboriginal people holding management-level positions and in self-employment. There was also a noticeable improvement in the level of youth involvement in the local economy. Education proved to be an important factor in economic involvement; the employment rate of Aboriginal people with at least a high school diploma was nearly equivalent to that of their non-Aboriginal peers.

In contrast, the research indicated that present environmental conditions were stable but showed signs of significant deterioration in the near future. The amount of green space and protected areas were fair for an urban area, but there is concern because of pressure placed on these areas by a growing population. Forecasting of air emissions shows that emission levels of greenhouse gases will increase well above the targets set by the Kyoto Accord. Similarly, there were causes of concern regarding our interior environment. Aboriginal people were significantly overrepresented among the region's homeless, and the rate of Aboriginal households requiring major repairs is one of the highest for large cities in Canada.

There were significant data gaps for various indicators. For many of the statistics, especially vital statistics, data was available for only one segment of the Aboriginal population (e.g. Status Indians); conversely, data was also aggregated to provide a general statistic for all Aboriginal people, and did not differentiate between the various Aboriginal groups. There were also issues regarding differing spatial coverage and a subsequent lack of region-specific data, as well as issues regarding a lack of past data. In addition, there was often a general lack of data on issues important to Aboriginal people, such as diabetes rates.

### **More research, better policy**

Policy needs to be developed that targets the basic socioeconomic conditions of urban Aboriginal people in the region. Issues of cultur-

al loss, housing and homelessness, education, and employment are key to improving many of the issues affecting Aboriginal people, such as health, crime and safety, and even salmon escapement.

Also, we must invest in more and better research. Specifically, we should conduct further research into what constitutes a "traditional" activity and develop a comprehensive approach to documenting homelessness in the Aboriginal community. Periodic 24-hour counts, while extremely useful, only provide a glimpse of the issue. Researchers should also undertake further research regarding both diabetes and cancer rates in the urban Aboriginal community. Rates for both diseases have significantly increased over the past 50 years, and urban Aboriginal populations may be influenced by characteristics that are unique compared to the rural population. A comprehensive study regarding Aboriginal involvement in the local urban economy is needed to examine the changing level of involvement, especially among youth.

We need to improve the gathering of vital statistics data regarding Aboriginal people to include all Aboriginal people, not just Status Indians. Lack of information regarding other portions of the Aboriginal population inhibits our ability to see a complete picture of the condition of health in the Aboriginal community. ■

---

The CNPR's report, "An Urban Aboriginal Life," is available for free download through their website and <[www.cnpr.ca](http://www.cnpr.ca)>.