

YOUTH WELLNESS



“I am definitely very hopeful for the future – to see how women will be able to show up and be present for their families and communities. I know for my own daughter Kwaya’tsiiq’Kwe, I can see that shift in health, wellness, and grounding. She has confidence and a connection to culture that is not linked to the heavily burdened notions of trauma and colonization. She has a different state of being – and a sense of what it means to truly be Anishinaabe. There is a sense of freedom that comes with that state – she isn’t resisting anything, just embracing who she is and what she sees in the world. I see that sense of purpose and grace. There is a lot of meaning to Living the Good Life as a young Indigenous woman now. It isn’t that we didn’t have it before, but living during the time of the Oka Crisis, for instance, there was a lot of heaviness. Now it’s all around reconciliation, revitalization of culture and language, and just being present without experiencing the harms of attending residential schools. There is a sense of being able to live freely, have choice. Freedom.”

- Kinwa Bluesky, Anishinaabe-kwe from the Sandy Lake First Nation and the Kitigan Zibi Anishinaabeg, living in Vancouver⁹

Youth hold a special place in First Nations families and communities. They represent the future, and their health and well-being is understood as integral to the well-being and continuance of First Nations communities overall.

First Nations have long recognized adolescence as a critical period of development and growth, when girls transition into young women. As adolescents, they begin to establish their role within their families and communities and create their own path.²

Rites of passage, such as coming-of-age ceremonies, are used to mark and celebrate this evolution. Through ceremony, young women receive blessings and teachings about their bodies and about their roles and responsibilities as adults. Culture and tradition also empower youth and affirm their identity, growing responsibilities, and connections to their community and the land as they prepare for adulthood.¹

This chapter highlights some key elements that describe and contribute to the health and wellness of woman-identifying First Nations youth living in BC. It also draws attention to the historical and ongoing structural and systemic barriers that can impact health at this phase and potentially throughout a woman’s wellness journey.

The majority of quantitative data in this chapter is from youth between the ages of 10-19 who have self-identified as “female.” However, the precise age range varies depending on the source of information. It is acknowledged that much of the data in this chapter dates back to 2013, and therefore may not reflect current realities. Updates will be made available in the future on the website: fnha.ca/sacredstrong.

HEALTHY, SELF-DETERMINING YOUTH & COMMUNITIES – ROOTS OF WELLNESS

The deepest roots of wellness for First Nations include self-determination, identity and connections to culture, the land and community. While important at every life stage, these connections can be especially significant in shaping young women's health during adolescence when so many aspects of their identity are in development.³ Having strong connections helps girls to feel supported as they take on the responsibilities of being an adult and decide how best to apply their gifts.²

“When you dance, it’s not just a hobby or activity you do for exercise. It’s ceremony and you honour the sacred connection to the mask that you’re dancing, the supernatural being that you’re honouring, and the story you’re telling.”

- Alix Goetzinger, Haida, 21, sharing her experience dancing in the Haida dance group, Hltaaxuulan Gud Ad K'aajuu, and the importance of cultural connection for the coming generations. She grew up in Haida Gwaii, dancing and singing in ceremony, and she came to understand it as a source of healing.⁶

CONNECTIONS TO ANCESTORS, CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND CEREMONY

A connection to culture provides an essential anchor for growth and well-being during adolescence. In the process of developing a strong and balanced sense of self, some young First Nations women begin to explore their roots and identity in greater depth. Strengthening this understanding and connection with their culture can help to instill confidence and pride, and foster a sense of purpose and belonging.

During youth, connection to culture can be expressed in many ways. Young First Nations women talk about how time spent learning a First Nations language, talking with their Elders, and taking part in dances or food-harvesting activities with their community, all contribute to their well-being and personal development.⁴ When surveyed in 2014-15, 100% of BC First Nations youth indicated that connecting to culture through First Nations teachings is important to them.⁵

“Being away from home is a struggle. I miss hearing my traditional language and learning from our Elders back home, but I made the choice to pursue education and opportunities on the Coast Salish Territory. I love my life in Vancouver but being away from home impacts my identity. I wish I knew more about our culture and traditions. I wish I could participate in more ceremonies. The LGBTQ2+ community in Vancouver is my safe space. We have so many different groups and sporting activities. The coming-out process is not easy; although I come from a very accepting family, it was a challenging time for me. Living in Vancouver and hearing people’s stories has empowered me and encouraged me to be proud of who I am.”

- Anonymous

It is common for young women's connections to culture to change as they gain more independence and explore the world. In moving to a new community or city, for example, some young First Nations women find an accepting environment, which can open up new opportunities to explore their heritage. For others, moving away from home can disrupt the connections they have with their family, Nation, and the land. Some express feeling a sense of “displacement” that challenges their wholistic wellness.⁸

A Note about Gender Inclusivity –

This chapter is intended to honour and celebrate the strengths of all First Nations youth living in BC who identify as and/or express themselves as women, including cisgender females, trans women, non-binary people and those who identify as Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer. The term “woman” is used in this chapter, however, as a binary term, it may not accurately reflect the gender and sexual identities of all those who are reflected in the experiences, data and stories discussed. Although there is currently very limited data available on the health and wellness of First Nations non-binary and transgender populations, these distinctions are important as a person's gender identity shapes their experiences, their social determinants of health, and their access to services.

“For me, staying well during COVID comes with connecting to my spirituality and healing my spirit. It comes with harvesting our traditional foods and medicines. It comes with speaking ǰa'islaǰala, my native tongue, learning my family history and the history of my Nation. It comes with singing, drumming, and dancing to our songs.”

- ǰándauxw, Megan Metz, Haisla First Nation⁷



PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Percentage of young First Nations women who were able to take part in activities related to their culture at least once a week:

2015-17



2002-03



2002-03; 2015-17 | RHS

“*ł̓aʔuukw̓iʔaʔh (Tla-o-qui-aht) language reflects the ecology of our home – it comes from the land. And so in learning our language, I was able to learn so much more about our culture than I ever dreamed of ... I learned not just our language, but I found pieces of my soul in different words that I learned.*”

- Gisele Martin, Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation, past participant of the FPCC Mentor-Apprentice Program¹⁰

FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGE

BC is home to 34 First Nations languages, accounting for 60% of First Nations languages in Canada. As of 2018, the First Peoples’ Cultural Council reported that 78.1% of learners of First Nations languages in BC were under the age of 24.¹¹

OF THOSE YOUNG FIRST NATIONS WOMEN WHO KNEW ANY WORDS IN THEIR NATION’S LANGUAGE ...

2015-17 | RHS



~ 1/10

WERE INTERMEDIATE/FLUENT IN UNDERSTANDING AND/OR SPEAKING

> 4.8%

FLUENT IN BOTH UNDERSTANDING AND SPEAKING

> 6.1%

FLUENT IN EITHER UNDERSTANDING OR SPEAKING

rites of passage

Many First Nations celebrate coming-of-age ceremonies as a way of honouring a girl’s transition to adulthood.¹² These ceremonies provide cultural grounding and support for youth to establish strong identities as they navigate puberty.¹³ They also help celebrate the respected position of First Nations women and girls in their Nations and communities.¹⁴

Ceremonies tend to differ for girls and boys. In some cases, with the Western influence of binary gender norms, ceremonies evolved over time to be less inclusive of youth who are Two-Spirit or non-binary in their gender identity. However, many communities are now acknowledging this departure and reviving rites of passage for every individual, regardless of their gender and/or sexuality.¹⁵

“When I started my year-long 13-Moon Ceremony, I was 11 years old. It was December and when I finished it was January, and I was 12 years old. It was the middle of winter. We had to actually go down to the river after our sweat and get into the water and bathe in the water. We had to actually go and get an axe so that we could break off the ice so that we had a way to get into the water without slipping. It was me, my mother and my aunts that were there. So there was probably about a good dozen of us women in the water at this point. And it was freezing cold, mind-numbingly cold, but the thing that makes it a really good memory is that it wasn’t just me sitting there in the water, it was all of my aunts at the same time. So it made me feel a lot closer to these women in my community and my mother. It was all of us at once. And I didn’t feel alone. It was just something that we had to do, and at that point, I had been through the training for a year so had developed a really deep sense of discipline and a sense of purpose in what we were doing.”

- Alexa Manuel, Syilx and St’át’imc Nations¹⁶

PROMISING PRACTICES

The **MENTOR-APPRENTICE PROGRAM** is a one-on-one language immersion program administered by the First Peoples’ Cultural Council that facilitates the development of fluent speakers of Indigenous languages by partnering fluent speakers with committed learners in an immersion environment in the home and on the land.

CULTURE IS HEALING is a program that Yúusnewas offers on the traditional and ancestral lands of the x̓m̓əθk̓w̓əy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and Tseil-Waututh Nations that works to improve cultural revitalization for Indigenous youth through accessible and low-barrier cultural, spiritual, and First Nations teachings, activities, and knowledge. The program also provides a safer space for Indigenous youth to access peer support in the areas of sexual health and harm reduction.



CONNECTIONS TO LAND, WATER AND TERRITORY

First Nations perspectives on wellness encompass a positive balance of relational connections between family, community and land. Beginning at birth, many girls are taught of their interconnectedness with the land, water and territory through stories, ceremony and teachings. As adolescents, young women are often engaged through various land-based activities that help to enhance their understanding of the world and the inseparability of land and water from health and well-being. Through coming-of-age ceremonies, young women often take part in transformative experiences on the land. They are also taught of their responsibilities around land stewardship.¹⁷ Due to the impacts of residential schools, the Sixties’ Scoop, and the Millennial Scoop, not all girls and young women have the benefit of these teachings.

As those who will inherit the environmental issues emerging today, youth demonstrate a heightened awareness and concern regarding the state and sustainability of the lands, waters, and natural systems.¹⁸ First Nations youth are often at the forefront of those highlighting the fundamental connections between colonialism and climate change, and they are participating in resistance efforts against further exploitation and contamination of their ancestral territories. Through programs such as [SUPPORTING EMERGING ABORIGINAL STEWARDS](#) (SEAS), First Nations youth are embracing their responsibility as stewards of the land, culture and resources,¹⁹ and are playing a key role in developing locally based solutions to address climate change.²⁰

Due to various factors, including the degradation of and displacement from territories, some First Nations youth face barriers maintaining a connection to the land. Still, for many, maintaining a relationship with the land remains a central component of their identity, how they stay connected to their culture, how they heal, and how they stay well. This land connection can be exercised in many ways, such as by participating in land-based cultural activities, engaging in First Nations food practices, and eating First Nations foods.²³

FIRST NATIONS FOODS

INDIGENOUS YOUTH WHO ATE FOODS FROM THEIR CULTURE WERE **MORE** LIKELY TO:

RATE THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AS GOOD OR EXCELLENT

79%
VS.
73%

FEEL GOOD ABOUT THEMSELVES

81%
VS.
74%

INDIGENOUS YOUTH WHO ATE FOODS FROM THEIR CULTURE WERE **LESS** LIKELY TO:

HAVE EXPERIENCED EXTREME STRESS IN THE PAST MONTH

11%
VS.
15%

HAVE SELF-HARMED IN THE PAST YEAR

20%
VS.
24%

2013 | AHS

3/4

2015-17 | RHS

OF FEMALE FIRST NATIONS YOUTH ATE AT LEAST ONE TYPE OF FIRST NATIONS FOOD (NOT INCLUDING BANNOCK) ON A REGULAR BASIS IN THE PAST YEAR



PROMISING PRACTICES

PROJECT RECLAIM is a land-based and youth-driven project of the Tsartlip, Tseycum, Tsawout and Pauquachin Nations. With support from Elders and community mentors, youth lead their community in preventing, resisting and healing from violence. Youth lead restoration projects to create greener, healthier spaces in the community. They also develop and deliver culturally relevant curricula in middle and high schools around preventing violence and fostering safer communities.

SUPPORTING EMERGING ABORIGINAL STEWARDS (SEAS) COMMUNITY INITIATIVE is a program designed to engage, develop, prepare and empower Indigenous youth to become the next generation of stewards in their communities and territories. Created in 2009, the SEAS Initiative has supported youth in four communities in the Great Bear Rainforest of BC on programs developed by the community and suited to the community’s priorities, needs and opportunities for engaging youth in stewardship learning and activities. Programs integrate traditional and cultural knowledge with Western science approaches – working to spark and strengthen the connections between youth and the natural world around them.

KOEYE CAMP is a land-based language and culture camp delivered by the Qqs Projects Society. It engages Heiltsuk youth in an immersive experience incorporating language lessons, First Nations foods and medicines, potlatch protocols, weaving and canoe pulling. Space is prioritized for urban Heiltsuk youth and youth in foster care.



CONNECTIONS TO FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Relationships and connections to family, community, and one’s Nation serve as anchoring points that help foster a sense of being loved and supported by others.²⁴ Young women and girls are often supported by matriarchs, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and Elders, who act as caring mentors, teachers and role models. They provide guidance, support, and important First Nations teachings, and can be pivotal as young women navigate the changes and challenges of adolescence.

Particularly during adolescence, a time of so many changes and transitions, positive social connections serve as a protective factor against injury and risk-taking behaviour.²¹ Having the love and attention of family has been shown to be pivotal in helping youth cope with social exclusion, bullying and physical assault.²¹ These supportive relationships are also key in supporting young women to thrive.

“My granny was always my saving grace. I spent a lot of time with her over the course of my life. She cared for me a lot as a baby, but I also spent time with her as a child and teenager, and then again as a young adult. I moved to Victoria for a few years, but I moved back to Port Hardy 13 years ago with my two boys, so that they could learn where they are from and I could care for my granny. She was why I moved home. She was very – just very humble. She had a calming nature about her. Completely non-judgemental and loving. I remember those beautiful qualities. I think that idea of just always being there – that stability, that unconditional love – it was so important to me and my wellness journey. She is definitely one of my biggest role models.”

- Maxwaks-Stephanie Bernard, from the Kwakwaka’wakw Nations²⁵

Adolescence is a time when girls typically gain increasing independence from our families. As youth begin to spend a greater amount of time with their peers and begin turning to them for their emotional needs, peer relationships become a more salient factor to wellness during adolescence.²⁹ Close friendships have been shown to be particularly influential as a predictor of positive mental health during the teen years as well as later in life.³⁰

“Over the years, I let people question my identity. They would ask questions like, ‘How can you identify as Haida when you grew up in Edmonton?’ Or make sweeping statements such as, ‘You don’t look Native. Can I see your status card?’ As if it were a badge of identity to be displayed on my arm; as if my status card, blue eyes or blood quantum were the answer to who I am. I came from two different worlds and I had been disconnected from my roots for so long that I let other people’s opinions define my identity. And that hurt. I made Woman Who Returns because it was the only way I could answer these questions. I needed to be vulnerable enough to explore how I belonged within my own community. I had to understand that it wasn’t my fault I didn’t feel grounded in my own Haida Identity – it wasn’t ingrained in me from an early age. I had to make a concerted effort to take ownership of it.”

- Heather Hatch, Haida from the Raven Clan. After reconnecting with her Nuni, Heather was adopted into the Raven Clan, and given the name Jaat Sdihlil’lxa, which means “the woman who returns.”²⁶

“It is within our families that we as individuals come to know our place in the world and to know ourselves as part of a larger collective.”

- Dr. Margo Greenwood, Cree ancestry¹³⁵

FAMILY CONNECTEDNESS

YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN FELT MORE CONNECTED TO THEIR FAMILIES THAN THEY DID IN PREVIOUS YEARS

2013 | AHS

RATINGS ON A 10-POINT SCALE OF FAMILY CONNECTEDNESS

2013



2003



The scale of family connectedness was compiled from responses from youth about their relationships with their parents and families more generally, i.e., whether they feel that their parents are warm and loving, the degree to which they feel close to and cared for, heard, and understood.

2003; 2013 | AHS

CARING ADULTS

64.5%

OF YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN FELT AS THOUGH THERE WAS AN ADULT IN THEIR COMMUNITY WHO REALLY CARED ABOUT THEM

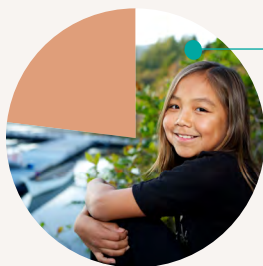
2013 | AHS

Indigenous youth who feel there is an adult in the community who cares about them are more likely to feel good about themselves than Indigenous youth who do not have a caring adult in their lives.

80% vs. 67%



PEER SUPPORTS – NUMBER OF CLOSE FRIENDS



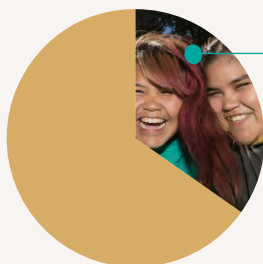
77%
OF YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN HAD AT LEAST THREE PEOPLE THEY CONSIDERED TO BE CLOSE FRIENDS

2013 | AHS

Being a part of a safe and inclusive community that is self-determining and has strong connections to one another and to the land provides opportunities for young First Nations women to contribute to and learn from their communities. Feeling connected helps youth to feel a sense of security and belonging.³¹ It also provides an important foundation for healthy behaviours and has been shown to be particularly salient as a protective factor for youth in adverse situations.³²

Many First Nations youth think of their community in relation to where they grew up. Others find and establish community in connection with their interests, gender orientation, school or sports.

COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS



34.8%
OF YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN FELT "QUITE A BIT" OR "VERY MUCH" A PART OF THEIR COMMUNITY

2013 | AHS

FEELING SAFE

86.8%

of young indigenous women "always" or "often" felt safe in their neighbourhood during the day

55.4%

felt "always" or "often" safe at night

2013 | AHS

"As an Indigenous woman, I am – and have always been – part of that wave of brown women who have safe spaces and vulnerability in a violent society at the forefront of their minds. Every time I read about another Indigenous woman who is murdered or missing, there's a pang of animal fear and the question, 'What if it had been me? What if someday, it's my daughter?'"

- 'Cúagilákv (Jess Housty), Haítzaqv (Heiltsuk) First Nation³³

Young First Nations women's perspectives and experiences of safety must be set within the broader intergenerational context in which First Nations women and girls live. These experiences and perspectives are of course shaped by those of their mothers, aunts and grandmothers³⁴ as well as the abuse and violence that First Nations men³⁵ and fathers³⁶ have endured.³⁷



PROMISING PRACTICES

INDIGENEYEZ is about transforming communities. Based in Sylix, IndigenEYEZ takes a holistic approach to teaching that blends land-based learning with the arts and best practices in community-building to inspire an intergenerational legacy of well-being among First Nations people in BC and beyond. Its youth camps are transformative learning experiences that provide a potent blend of the arts, the land, local cultures and languages, and intergenerational connections. Youth are empowered to take creative risks and discover new skills and passions. They gain confidence in their ability to engage the issues in their lives and begin to truly stand in their own power.

"As someone who is trans and identifies as Two-Spirit, I really wasn't able to truly conceptualize who I was until I met other Two-Spirit people. And so when I did, it was really quite magical. I was doing some engagement work in the community and one of the people I was working with, we started sharing some of our stories, and what we found was that so many of our stories were the same – even though we were from different Nations and different communities, we had so many similar experiences. Growing up, living in the north and being trans and Two-Spirit, you just never expect there to be someone like you out there – and so to find someone that was, it was so magical. It helped me see that I wasn't alone. It was like it was ok for me to exist because there is someone that already does."

- Jean Baptiste, Wet'suwet'en Nation²⁸

SUPPORTIVE SYSTEMS

The wellness of young First Nations women is shaped above all by having self-determination, a strong sense of self, cultural identity, and the ability to be in balance with the world around them. It is also shaped by the systems they must interact with to meet their basic needs: systems for education, health care, housing, transportation and justice.

Long before colonization, First Nations had highly sophisticated systems and protocols that provided for the basic needs of community members. While First Nations approaches remain in place, Western systems that are rooted in colonialism continue to oppress First Nations ways of being. As a result, young First Nations women continue to face racism, discrimination, and marginalization when going about their daily lives, including accessing services and pursuing opportunities. This exposure to racism is compounded by the impacts of sexism and other socially constructed biases. Young First Nations women face disproportionate levels of risk compared their non-Indigenous peers; risk in the form of abuse, exploitation, bullying and harassment.

First Nations youth are choosing to take action in diverse and creative ways, such as through the WE MATTER campaign, to promote approaches that are adapted to their lived realities and driven by youth needs and priorities.

MAINSTREAM SYSTEMS AND THE ONGOING INTERGENERATIONAL LEGACY OF COLONIALISM

RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

Young First Nations women in BC continue to be negatively impacted by the mainstream education, health care, youth protection, and justice systems, all of which are rooted in colonial ideologies. Systemic racism and social exclusion within these systems perpetuate violence, poverty, lack of adequate housing, poor living conditions, and intergenerational trauma.^{38,39} Racist stereotypes and biases shape how young First Nations women and their families are treated within these systems and are at the base of why many young First Nations women continue to encounter barriers and disrespect in accessing culturally appropriate health and legal services.³⁸ While the data shared here is close to 10 years old, in 2020 the Addressing Racism Review reported that these systemic barriers remain in place and that First Nations women are disproportionately impacted.

RACE-BASED DISCRIMINATION

Percentage of young Indigenous women and men who faced discrimination because of their ethnicity, skin colour or race:

YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN



YOUNG INDIGENOUS MEN



2013 | AHS

SEX/GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION

> YOUNG WOMEN ARE CONSIDERABLY MORE LIKELY THAN MALES TO BE SUBJECT TO DISCRIMINATION ON THE BASIS OF THEIR SEX/GENDER

> YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN EXPERIENCE SEX/GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION MORE OFTEN THAN THEIR NON-INDIGENOUS FEMALE PEERS

2013 | AHS

SEXUAL ORIENTATION-BASED DISCRIMINATION:

Percentage of Indigenous females who were discriminated against or treated unfairly because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation:

2013



2003



2003; 2013 | AHS



PROMISING PRACTICES

WE MATTER is an Indigenous-youth-led national campaign started in 2016 to allow Indigenous role models and allies from across Canada to share messages about their own experiences of overcoming hardships, and to communicate to Indigenous youth that no matter how hopeless life can feel, there is always a way forward.



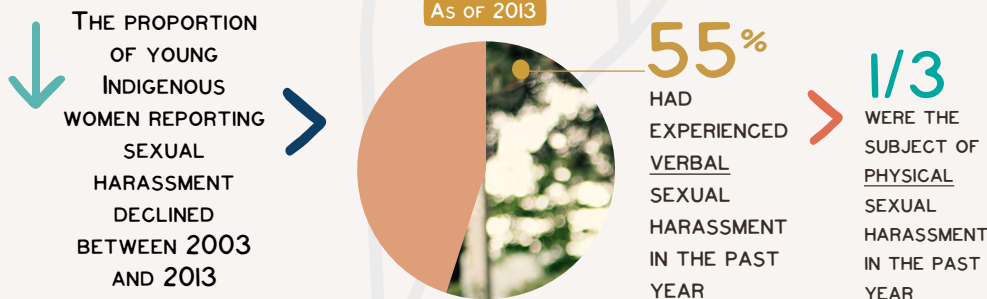
VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

First Nations have always had ceremony, protocols and teachings that affirm young women as sacred and help to ensure their protection. These were stolen from generations of First Nations through colonization, which deliberately undermined the power, rights, autonomy and respect that First Nations women and girls held within their communities as a way of undermining Nations' ways of being.⁴⁰ Gendered violence has been used as a tool to further control First Nations women.⁴¹ As highlighted by the National Inquiry into MMIWG, systemic and societal values, enacted in policies, structures and institutions, have worked to create and maintain a culture of impunity around the violence – and have also fueled the egregious assumption that First Nations families, women and girls are somehow themselves to blame.⁴² The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted how gender-based violence increases during times of crisis.⁴³

"You're more likely to be a victim of violence and sexual assault [if you're Indigenous]. It's scary raising daughters and being afraid, hoping that they're not among that three-quarters of Aboriginal women who have to grow up with that. And these statistics only go up as development goes up."

- Geraldine Thomas-Flurer, Saik'uz First Nation⁴⁴

SEXUAL HARASSMENT: VERBAL AND PHYSICAL

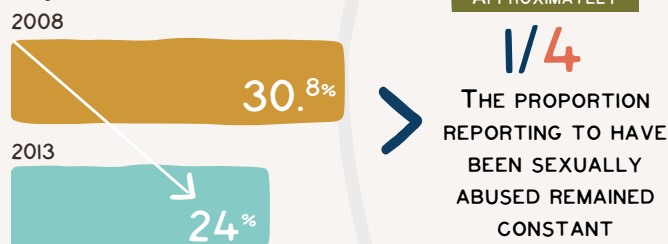


3X
THE RATE OF PHYSICAL SEXUAL HARASSMENT AMONG YOUNG WOMEN – BOTH INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS – WAS ALMOST THREE TIMES THAT OF THEIR INDIGENOUS MALE PEERS

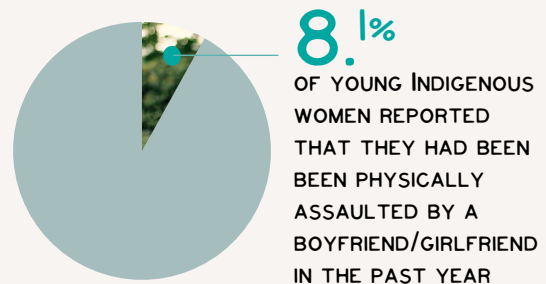
2003; 2013 | AHS

ABUSE: PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL

Reported cases of physical abuse by young Indigenous women decreased:



2008; 2013 | AHS



2013 | AHS

The everyday realities of young First Nations women are shaped by the pervasive threat of violence that has been created and maintained by colonialism. At the same time, for as long as violence has been inflicted against First Nations women and girls, there has been resistance against it. This ceaseless resistance is apparent in everyday individual acts of resistance of young First Nations women coming together, supporting each other, and speaking out against the violence.

YOUNG WOMEN – BOTH INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS – WERE MORE LIKELY THAN YOUNG MEN TO BE VICTIMS OF ABUSE



RATES OF SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN WERE ALSO CONSIDERABLY HIGHER THAN AMONG THEIR NON-INDIGENOUS FEMALE PEERS

2013 | AHS



The resistance and resiliency is also evident in Nation-level actions to reclaim vital teachings, practices and ceremonies, such as coming-of-age ceremonies, which seek to restore First Nations women and girls to their rightfully respected place within their communities.

The following is an account of a coming-of-age ceremony at the House of Huu-ay-aht in Anacla. Elders at the event shared that this was the first time they could remember a coming-of-age being celebrated in the House of Huu-ay-aht.⁴⁵

As eagle down began to float around the ankles of the dancers, rattles and a voice rose from the circle, drums followed, and finally two sea serpents emerged. As the voices and drums grew louder, a canoe began rising above the dancers, on the shoulders of men. Sitting in the middle were Helena and Cierra, with two guardians by their sides. The canoe made its way down the centre aisle and circled the front of the building. Dancers followed, all paddling to the beat of the drums and voices that sang out. Finally, with tears running down their faces, the young women were seated at the front of the room with their guardians.

Helena's father, Cory, explained that aside from receiving a new name and finding out who their relatives are, teaching the young women they deserve respect is the most important part of the event. "It's about raising them up and showing off how important they are because they bring life into the world. They need to be reminded that they deserve respect."

Hereditary chiefs from several Nations were then called up to wash the young women's feet. Cory explained that this is an important part of the ceremony. By bowing down in front of the young women and washing their feet, the chiefs are putting themselves below the young women, when they would usually be above them.

It is a sign of respect and a way of honouring them on their special day.

The final step in the official ceremony was giving each of the girls a new name. Helena was given the name of her grandmother Marie Nookemus, which comes from her grandmother before her – Kla-qwo-klee-nulth. Sara Dennis, hereditary chief for the Ka:'yu:'k't'h' / Che:k'tles7et'h' Nation, offered Cierra her name – Kluu-ath-apee.





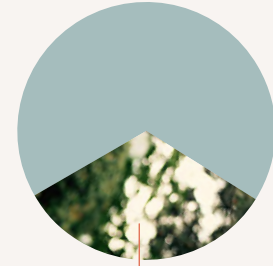
LATERAL VIOLENCE AND BULLYING

At times, the violence and trauma that has been inflicted upon First Nations communities through the *Indian Act*, residential schools, the Sixties’ Scoop, and other colonial institutions and policies, may be misdirected towards family members, children and community in the form of lateral violence, bullying, homophobia or transphobia.

As a counterpoint to lateral violence, *lateral kindness* is an approach to addressing the various forms of unkindness that arise when the hurt and oppression caused by colonialism manifests in anger towards other people in the form of gossip, verbal and physical assaults, passive-aggressive behaviours, blaming, shaming, bullying, and threatening or intimidating behaviour. Drawing from First Nations teachings about respect, fairness, and the importance of relationships, lateral kindness aims to create an environment built on a foundation of kindness.⁴⁶

“When we think to the future, we consider the legacy we will leave for those who come after us: our children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and other young people for generations to come. One of the best legacies we can leave them is an education that will help prevent violence and keep Indigenous women and girls safe so that they can all flourish. Together, we can create a society in which all Indigenous lives are valued.”⁵¹

BULLYING AND CYBER BULLYING



32.9%

OF YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN REPORTED HAVING BEEN BULLIED AT LEAST ONCE



14.8%

YOUNG INDIGENOUS MEN REPORTED THE SAME

2015-17 | RHS



PROMISING PRACTICES

VOICES WILL GUIDE US is a student and youth engagement guide created by the National Inquiry into MMIWG. It invites students of all ages to understand the crisis of violence through forging connections with communities in their own area, and engages them in generating arts-based messages of resilience, truth, hope, solidarity and justice.

The **ESK’ETEMC (ALKALI LAKE) COMMITMENT STICK INITIATIVE** was launched in November 2016 to end all forms of violence against women and girls. Started by Alkali Lake (Esk’etemc) Elder Fred Johnson Sr., with the support of Chief Charlene Belleau, the Commitment Sticks were designed to signify the sacred responsibilities we have for the health and safety of Indigenous women and girls, as well as to remind us of their infinite value. The act of picking up a Commitment Stick symbolizes a personal and professional commitment of time to live violence-free and to actively stop violence against Indigenous women and girls.

N’WE JINAN is a non-profit organization that travels to Indigenous communities and schools across North America working to amplify the voices and stories of youth. Empowering youth with knowledge in sound recording, music production, song writing, voice and performance, the program provides a platform for youth to share their experiences and relate to their broader community. N’we Jinan has worked with youth in several First Nations in BC including Kitsumkalum First Nation youth, who created and produced a **SONG** and music video about the Highway of Tears (see lyrics on **PAGE 45**).

“As Indigenous youth, we are not only inheriting a climate crisis that is driven by fossil fuel projects like the Coastal Gas Link Pipeline, but we are inheriting a legacy. A Canadian legacy of genocide, colonization, marginalization, gendered violence. The man camps, the construction of these pipelines: they threaten the bodies of Indigenous girls, Two-Spirit people. In defending the land, we are defending our bodies.”

- Ta’Kaiya Blaney, Tla’Amin First Nation²²





THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

In both First Nations and Western cultures, young women are at the stage of life when they are learning to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. First Nations view education as experiential and wholistic. Learning takes place in both formal and informal settings: in the home, on the land, in community spaces, and in the classroom. First Nations knowledge and teachings are key in building identity, cultural continuity, strength, and resilience. Succeeding in the mainstream educational system, including high-school graduation and post-secondary training, has also become essential to the majority of jobs in today’s labour market.⁵²

There are a growing number of land-based programs for First Nations youth that combine First Nations culture and teaching with mainstream scientific knowledge. In BC, there have also been committed efforts to integrate Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into the mainstream education curriculum and institutions to the benefit of all students – First Nations and non-First Nations.⁵³ Still, for many First Nations youth, these two streams of learning remain largely distinct, and create pressure to become literate in both ways of knowing – and to integrate and/or balance Western and First Nations ways of knowing in their work and activities.

In addition, while an increasing percentage of Indigenous youth – females in particular – are succeeding in the mainstream education system, they are less likely than their non-Indigenous peers to feel connected to school.

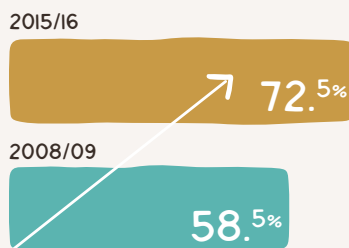
“That’s kind of where I see my role in our people’s language revitalization ... I’m an instrument for my ancestors. Every day I work through my ancestors and especially with our language, it’s an everyday effort to save our language ... I think it’s important that we not just preserve but continue to use our language in the everyday context and even if that means I’m on Instagram using my Kwak’wala all the time. When you learn your language, you’re learning the worldview of your ancestors. I really take that to heart and I try to live through that every day.”

- Sydney Malidi Roberts studied at the University of British Columbia for six years to become a Kwak’wala teacher with a specialization in Indigenous pedagogy. Upon completion of her program, Sydney moved back to her community to further her cultural education, and shares much of her language journey on Instagram.⁵⁴



SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES

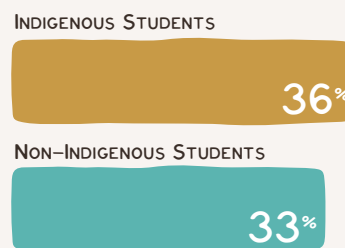
Eight-year completion rates for young Indigenous women increased steadily:



2008/09; 2015/16 | BC Ministry of Education

INDIGENOUS CONTENT IN BC PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Percentage of students in Grades 10 and 12 at BC public schools who reported that they were “many times” and “all of the time” taught about Indigenous peoples in Canada:



2014/15 | BC Ministry of Education, School Satisfaction Survey



ECONOMIC SYSTEM

Many young First Nations women have jobs and their own sources of income. During the later adolescent years, many young women move out on their own. However, in most cases, and particularly during the early teens, the ability of young First Nations women to meet their basic needs – with enough nutritious food to eat, a safe and stable home, and sufficient income to buy clothing and other life necessities, is determined mainly by circumstances beyond their control. In some cases, this economic, food and housing security is linked to the community’s access to sustainable and non-contaminated First Nations territories for hunting and other resource-producing activities.⁵⁵



FOOD SYSTEM

First Nations perspectives of wellness bring focus to the importance of food to all spheres of a person's life: physically, spiritually, mentally and emotionally. For many First Nations in BC, food holds special cultural significance – and having access to First Nations foods and food practices is part of how many young women stay well, connected to the land and to community.⁵⁶ Being able to afford and physically access enough food each and every day is vital to healthy growth and development.

While a complexity of factors associated with colonialism continues to impact the food security of many First Nations families and communities,⁵⁷ a growing number of communities are reviving First Nations food harvesting, history and culture as a way of increasing access to and control over their food.⁵⁸

HOUSING

A healthy home environment provides young First Nations women with the physical and social conditions necessary for health, safety, hygiene, and comfort.⁵⁹ Research has found that the quality, adequacy, affordability, appropriateness, location and accessibility of housing all influence physical, mental, and emotional wellness.⁶⁰ Overcrowded living conditions, for example, have been linked to an increased risk of certain cancers through exposure to second-hand smoke, as well as the spread of communicable diseases such as tuberculosis.⁶¹ Unsuitable and cramped housing has been found to precipitate higher levels of stress and violence, substance abuse, addiction and suicide.⁶² Unstable housing, leading to frequent moves and the use of temporary housing, can also impact a youth's wellness, as well as their access to and use of wellness and social supports.⁶³ Among young Indigenous women who had left home/run away, over half (55%) indicated that a stable home environment would have helped them stay at home.⁶⁴

GOING TO BED HUNGRY



82.5%
of young Indigenous women never went to bed hungry due to a lack of money for food.

17.5%

of young Indigenous women indicated that they did experience hunger at the end of the day at least some of the time because there was not enough money for food in their home.

2013 | AHS

HOUSING

Percentage of female youth who live in housing considered to be "suitable":

FEMALE INDIGENOUS YOUTH



FEMALE NON-INDIGENOUS YOUTH



2016 | Census

Percentage of Indigenous youth who ran away from home in the past year:

FEMALE INDIGENOUS YOUTH



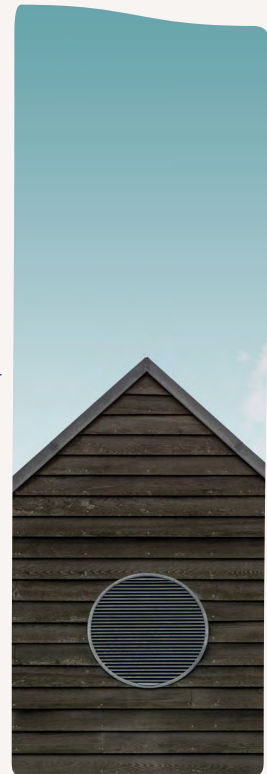
MALE INDIGENOUS YOUTH



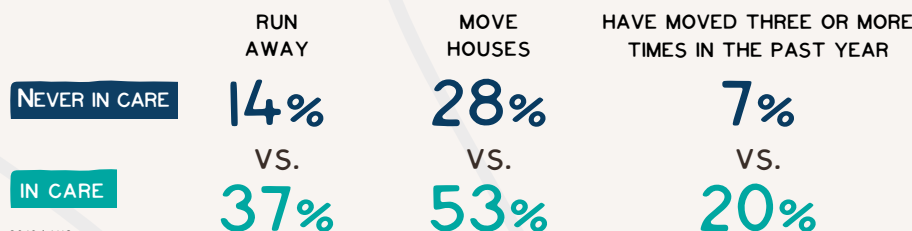
TWO-SPIRIT YOUTH



2013 | AHS



INDIGENOUS YOUTH NEVER IN GOVERNMENT CARE WERE **LESS LIKELY** THAN THEIR PEERS IN CARE TO:



2013 | AHS



Youth who experience ongoing housing instability are also at greater risk of precarious housing situations and homelessness.⁶⁴



PROMISING PRACTICES

XPEY SELHNI, THE CEDAR WOMAN HOUSE is a unique and innovative purpose-built facility operated by Snuneymuxw First Nation (SFN) for Indigenous women and children in the region of the Hul'q'umin'um'-speaking people who have experienced violence or are at risk of experiencing it. With programming designed around Indigenous values and cultural priorities, Cedar Woman House serves the immediate need for emergency shelter and services for Indigenous women and children. A second phase of the project will see the development of a long-term, purpose-built facility that will include the safe home and transition housing for Indigenous women and children, as well as second-stage housing for Indigenous peoples. As a means of healing and breaking the cycle of violence, SFN will focus on ancestral teachings (including those of the Coast Salish Snawayalth) that tell us that the interconnectedness of self, family and community is essential to the survival of our language, culture, and all that we consider sacred.⁶⁵

“For Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people, the denial of the right to housing or adequate health care can place them in even more vulnerable situations, making them targets for predators. Further, the failure to protect a woman’s or child’s right to adequate housing, for example, can make people stay in abusive situations, in order to avoid becoming homeless.”

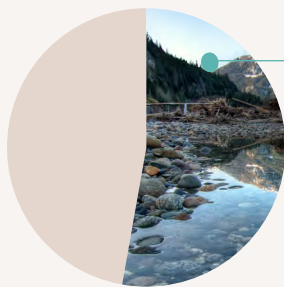


- MMIWG, Volume 1, page 188

HOMELESSNESS

Indigenous youth, including First Nations youth, are consistently overrepresented among homeless counts in cities across BC, a reality that cannot be separated from the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism and discrimination – the loss of lands, the *Indian Act*, residential schools, the Sixties’ Scoop, and child welfare institutions.⁶⁶

HOMELESSNESS



2014 | HSIYS

53%
OF YOUTH AGED 12 TO 19 WHO RESPONDED TO THE HOMELESS AND STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH SURVEY (HSIYS) CONDUCTED IN BC IDENTIFIED AS INDIGENOUS^a



79%
OF THESE IDENTIFIED AS FIRST NATIONS⁶⁴

64%
REPORTED HAVING A FAMILY MEMBER WHO HAD BEEN IN A RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL⁶⁴



Research on homelessness often points to a predominance of males within the homeless population. It is important to note, however, that women and girls tend to be vastly underrepresented in homeless counts.⁶⁷ Because living on the streets is inherently unsafe, particularly for young women, trans, gender-diverse and Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer youth, these populations tend to be more commonly among the “hidden homeless,”^b often doubling up with families and friends or staying in unsafe situations such as abusive relationships rather than staying on the street or accessing services for the homeless.⁶⁸

Precarious housing also places youth – and particularly woman-identifying youth – at increased risk of sexual exploitation. Research conducted in BC communities such as Prince Rupert, Abbotsford or Kelowna, have found approximately one in three homeless and street-involved young people (including Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth) report having traded sex for money, drugs, or other things.⁶⁹

In the past, many homeless counts did not report on the number of Indigenous female youth and only recently have they begun to allow respondents to identify themselves in non-binary ways.

^aThe HSIYS allowed respondents to identify as more than one Indigenous group.

^b“Hidden homelessness” refers to individuals who do not have permanent housing and are only able to access temporary or short-term accommodations, including staying with friends, family, and strangers. They often do not access housing support and services and remain “hidden” in statistical counts.



HEALTH SYSTEM

Children typically access health services with the support of family, however, during adolescence, youth are gaining more independence. They may be more reluctant to involve their parents and guardians or to consult their family health providers for concerns regarding their wellness, particularly in relation to substance use, emotional problems, or reproductive issues.⁷⁰ Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer, non-binary and trans youth, as well as those with a history of trauma, can face additional barriers in accessing health supports as well as fears of not being understood, stigmatization and re-traumatization.⁷¹ It is important therefore that primary health care services are culturally safe, trauma-informed and easily accessible to youth, including those who have limited access to transportation.⁷²

Embedding cultural safety and cultural humility into the health care system creates environments where young First Nations women feel safe, supported, heard and respected. When care providers come from a place of cultural humility, young First Nations women are more likely to access health care and social supports when they need them — and access supports that are appropriate to their wellness beliefs, goals, and needs.⁷³ When services are not provided with respect and/or the provider lacks cultural understanding and sensitivity to past traumas, these negative experiences can prevent young women from accessing the system when they need it.⁷⁴

SEEKING MEDICAL CARE WHEN NEEDED

The percentage of young Indigenous women who did not need medical help in the past year or got the medical help they needed increased:

2013



2008



2008; 2013 | AHS

15.1%

REPORTED THAT THEY NEEDED MEDICAL HELP BUT DID NOT GET IT

2013 | AHS

2013

THE TOP THREE REASONS GIVEN BY YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN WHO DID FOREGO MEDICAL CARE WHEN THEY NEEDED IT WERE:

1

THEY THOUGHT THE PROBLEM WOULD GO AWAY

2

THEY DID NOT WANT THEIR PARENTS TO KNOW

3

THEY WERE AFRAID OF WHAT THE DOCTOR WOULD SAY OR DO

PROMISING PRACTICES

In November 2017, Indigenous youth from over 30 communities in northern BC gathered together in Smithers, Prince George and Fort St. John for facilitated sessions on the topics related to primary care, mental wellness, substance use, and traditional wellness. The “Ancient Cultures, Modern Wellness” gatherings asked youth to discuss what improvements in health care they would like to see. In response, over 100 youth expressed their need to be involved in collective health on their terms, in a process they understand. Participants from each of the gatherings voiced their health and wellness priorities through developed scripts for Public Service Announcements. The following — entitled “Do you see the difference?” — was developed by youth from north central areas of BC.

“DO YOU SEE THE DIFFERENCE?

SOME SEE AN INDIVIDUAL, WE SEE A COMMUNITY.

SOME SEE SKIN COLOUR, WE SEE AN EQUAL.

SOME SEE AN OVERCROWDED ROOM, WE SEE A CEREMONY.

SOME SEE A PLANT, WE SEE A MEDICINE.

SOME SEE YOUTH, WE SEE OUR FUTURE.

DO YOU SEE THE DIFFERENCE?”⁷⁶

“I began my nursing journey after being inspired by the community nurses I met while briefly living in my grandma’s home community. Since then, I have become a registered nurse and I have been able to influence the health care experiences and outcomes for Indigenous people as an Indigenous Patient Care Clinician. I get to work with Indigenous folks and their families as they receive care and help to advocate for culturally safe treatment. I also work with care teams to support them to learn and apply culturally safe and trauma-informed practice. It is an honour and incredible privilege to be able to support people when they are having a hard time and help to ensure that they receive respectful, kind, and compassionate care. I did not imagine myself in this type of role when I started nursing school and it has been an incredible journey to get here — I am excited to see what new opportunities to promote health for Indigenous people come up in my career!”

- Jessica Key, Registered Nurse, Musgamaukw Dzewada’enuxw Nations⁷⁵



HPV VACCINATION RATES

The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. HPV often remains undetected and clears on its own, however for some people, HPV does not go away, and cells infected with the virus become cancerous over time. HPV infections cause 90% of anogenital warts and 70% of cervical cancers, as well as a large proportion of anal, penile, vaginal and vulvar, mouth and throat cancers. The HPV vaccine protects both females and males against HPV infections.

In BC, the HPV vaccine is recommended for anyone with a cervix between the ages of nine and 45 and it is offered for free to all children (girls and boys) in Grade 6.⁷⁸ Due to various barriers to HPV immunization and other preventative screening measures, including a lack of culturally sensitive care and awareness/understanding,⁷⁹ immunization rates among First Nations women and girls were below the Other Resident population. Prevalence rates of cervical cancer are also 1.6 times higher among First Nations women than among Other Residents.⁸⁰ However, with targeted efforts to address these systemic inequities, rates of HPV immunization among First Nations women and girls have improved and, in 2012, had exceeded those of Other Residents.

YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM

First Nations cultures traditionally approach justice differently from European settler society – with an underlying focus on the resolution of disputes, the healing of wounds, and the restoration of social harmony.⁸¹ With the enactment of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*, the BC Government has committed to bring provincial laws into harmony with First Nations rights and principles of justice and law.⁸² In the meantime, however, young First Nations women continue to be disproportionately impacted by and represented within colonial justice systems.⁸³

The National Inquiry into MMIWG highlighted how this overrepresentation is directly tied to the violence, poverty and disruption of family life that has been imposed upon First Nations communities through colonialism. The National Inquiry provided explicit evidence of how the Canadian system not only causes but perpetuates violence against First Nations women and girls and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples. It also outlined the steps for addressing the issue through the reclamation of Nation-based systems and protocols of justice and community-based solutions to crime prevention and reintegration.⁴¹

HPV IMMUNIZATION

69%



THE AVERAGE RATE OF FIRST NATIONS WOMEN WHO COMPLETED THE HPV IMMUNIZATION SERIES PRIOR TO THEIR 16TH BIRTHDAY. THIS RATE INCREASED BETWEEN 2003 AND 2015 TO REACH THIS LEVEL

2009-2015 | BCCDC

AVOIDABLE HOSPITALIZATIONS – INJURIES

RATES OF HOSPITALIZATIONS DUE TO INTENTIONAL AND NON-INTENTIONAL INJURIES WERE HIGHER AMONG YOUNG FIRST NATIONS WOMEN AS COMPARED TO OTHER RESIDENTS

2001-03; 2013-15 | Hospital Discharge Records

YOUTH CUSTODY RATES

THERE WAS A DECLINE IN THE RATE OF YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN (12-17 YEARS OLD) IN PROVINCIAL CUSTODY IN BC



2006/07 - 2016/17 | BC Ministry of Child & Family Development

PROMISING PRACTICES

THE HEILTSUK GVI'LAS RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PROGRAM

employs value-based processes that engage Elders, adults and youth to build capacity and connectivity with the Heiltsuk community as a way of preventing and responding to conflict and harm. The program includes outreach and prevention initiatives for youth, restorative justice circles, and family meetings.

AM'UT (which means “home” in Coast Salish) is a culture-based, full-time attendance program that promotes healing, resilience and a strong female identity to help girls address issues and continue on to a positive future in their community. An alternative to incarceration, the program operates out of a house in Surrey as a four-bed residential program. It is staffed by a caring team of gender-responsive, trauma-informed professionals that includes a clinical counsellor, an art therapist, and a First Nations Elder.

The **XW-L-ALE-CEGEMALA (KIDS COME TO LIFE)** program of the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society uses a restorative justice model focused on culturally based rehabilitation and reintegration to support Indigenous youth living in and around Kelowna on the territories of the Syilx Okanagan Nation who are involved, or at risk of being involved, with the criminal justice system.



YOUTH WELFARE SYSTEM

Young First Nations women, trans, gender-diverse and Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer youth are overrepresented among youth in government care.

Following recommendations, calls to action, and calls for justice from several inquiries and reports highlighting the colonial policies and approaches that have caused this overrepresentation,^{85,86} the child welfare system is undergoing significant transformation to address its historic and ongoing role of removing First Nations children from their family, community and culture.⁸⁷ A growing number of First Nations communities are reclaiming control of their own child welfare services by developing culturally appropriate parenting programs and reviving the systems of culture and knowledge that for thousands of years ensured the safe and effective protection of children and youth.⁸⁸ Some hold homecoming ceremonies where they bring children and youth who have been placed in government care back to their home territory to preserve their cultural identity. Nations such as the Heiltsuk Nation are proud to have brought home 90% of their youth in care.⁸⁹

“It’s my firm belief that the foster care system is working the way it’s designed: as a machine to destroy Indigeneity. And we need to look at restructuring it. We need to look at how the system is removing Indigenous children from Indigenous mothers ... An Indigenous mother may receive \$600 on welfare to feed her children. The foster care system can say that’s not good enough, take the child and put it in a home, and give that home \$1800 to feed those children. So they’re giving more money to non-Indigenous parents to feed Indigenous children, and they’re not supplying Indigenous parents with any support.”

- jaye simpson (they/them), 23, an Oji-Cree trans person born and raised in BC and a member of the Sapotaweyak Cree Nation in Manitoba. jaye spent 16 years in government care before aging out at 19.⁸⁴

“On a Sunday afternoon after a church service, I was given a Haida-designed necklace and told by the only other Indigenous woman in the congregation that I was an Indian. I remember the sun shining in through the doors in Edmonton that day. I was raised by my mother (of German heritage), adopted by my father and my culture was hidden from me until the age of 14, when I began to explore why I’d always felt different from the rest of my family.

“Between the ages of 14 and 20 I experienced the breakup of my family and as a result I experienced homelessness and the child welfare system. During this time my long-standing issue with anorexia landed me in the hospital because my heart stopped beating due to my illness.

“A healing journey began after I received care for my mental health. I learned that at the core of this disease I felt ashamed of who I was because I did not belong anywhere. After my recovery I went home to Haida Gwaii to live with my grandmother in my twenties.”

- Jaat Sdihlil’lxa, Heather Hatch, Haida from the Raven Clan⁹¹

YOUTH IN CARE
THE RATE OF YOUNG
INDIGENOUS WOMEN
(10–18 YEARS) IN
CARE WAS
13.2x
THAT OF YOUNG
NON-INDIGENOUS
WOMEN

2016 | BC Ministry of Child & Family Development; NHS

Still, far too many young First Nations women continue to experience the intergenerational effects of the mainstream system responsible for removing generations of First Nations children from their homes and their communities. Upon aging out of government care at the age of 19, many youth find themselves having to manage many significant life changes, including the transition to self-sufficiency, with minimal supports. As a result, these youth are at high risk of experiencing challenges and impediments to their success.⁹⁰



HEALTHY BODIES, MINDS AND SPIRITS

The vision of healthy, vibrant, self-determining young First Nations women involves well-nourished roots of wellness. It also requires the creation and maintenance of supportive systems that are free of systemic barriers. Having these elements in place will create the foundations necessary for *all* young First Nations women, their families and communities to flourish.

This section explores select health outcomes for young First Nations women living in BC: outcomes that are vital to development, happiness and fulfillment during youth and that can also shape the path of a woman's wellness in future phases of their life journey.

BEING ACTIVE

First Nations communities have long and rich histories of physical activity and athleticism. The benefits and importance of being active reverberate through the teachings; pre-settlement, physical activity was a major part of First Nations people's everyday ways of life. However, in today's world, many young women, First Nations and non-First Nations, live more sedentary lifestyles.⁹²

It is increasingly common for people of all ages both at work or school and in their time off to be engaged in screen-based activities, including watching television, working at a computer, using the Internet including social media, reading online, or playing seated video games. A youth's access to physical activity can be impeded by lack of resources and/or transportation challenges.⁹³ Young First Nations women living with disabilities can face unique challenges and barriers when it comes to staying active and participating in sports.⁹⁴ Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer and gender-diverse students have also been found to be significantly less likely than other youth to participate in physical activity and organized in sports, suggesting that these youth also face barriers when it comes to being active.⁹⁵

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



68%

OF YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN WERE GETTING THE RECOMMENDED⁹⁶ HOUR OF MODERATE-TO-VIGOROUS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY THREE OR MORE DAYS PER WEEK

2013 | AHS

PROMISING PRACTICES

Since 2009, youth of the Syilx First Nations have come together to run a 274-km section of the Okanagan Nation Territory and raise awareness of suicide and mental health issues. The **SYLX UNITY RUN** is a youth-led initiative to encourage and strengthen healthy lifestyles and living through action and physical exercise activity. It is also an opportunity for youth to experience being out on their territory, being together as Nation as a means to address a broad range of community and societal issues, from suicide and mental health to cultural rejuvenation and reconnection with Nationhood and the land.



HEALTHY EATING AND BODY IMAGE

Many First Nations Elders and Knowledge Keepers teach that “Food is medicine.” Eating balanced and nutritious meals contributes to wellness at all stages of life. Due to the significant and rapid growth and development that happens during adolescence, eating well during youth is particularly important.⁹⁷ Nutrition during adolescence can help prevent adult diet-related chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, and osteoporosis.⁹⁸ The harvesting of food, preparation and sharing of meals are also important times for connecting with culture, family, community and the land.⁹⁹

“Food is really our medicine. That’s what I feel. It’s what we put in our bodies is what we’re going to get out of life.”


- Janine Sampson, Stellar’en First Nation²³

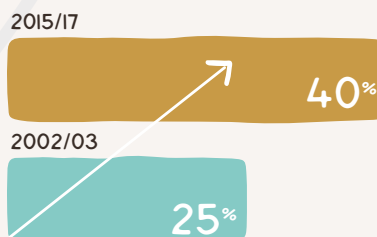
EATING NUTRITIOUS MEALS

First Nations young women who reported eating nutritious and balanced meals:



- 40% “always” or “almost always”
- 50% “sometimes”

The proportion of First Nations young women who reported eating balanced and nutritious meals “always” or “almost always” increased: 



2002-03; 2015-17 | RHS



2015-17 | RHS

HEALTHY BODY IMAGE

Body image is influenced by many complex factors, including a young woman’s identity and culture – and in the case of many young First Nations women, colonialism and racism.^{100,101,102} The introduction of Eurocentric ideals and body standards perpetuated by the media has negatively affected the health and wellness of many young First Nations women (e.g., resulting in body-image dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and disordered eating).^{101, 103}

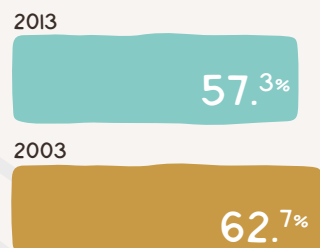
“I just remember when I was feeling really insecure, I called my mom and I honestly was just like, ‘Mom how do I deal with this insecurity? I feel like I’m not good enough, I just don’t feel pretty,’ and she said, ‘You really are getting caught up in this Western world.’”

- Sheila, Indigenous youth research participant¹⁰²

Many find the strength to overcome these issues and embrace healthy bodies through learning about First Nations knowledge and reconnecting with culture. Access to healthy First Nations women and Elders as role models, and learning to procure and prepare healthy and First Nations foods, have also been found to help empower female youth and reduce their need to “fit in” with settler-colonial social norms and values.^{101, 104}

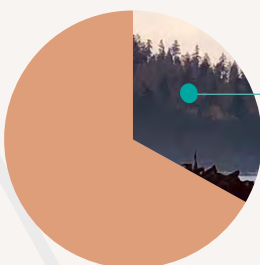
BODY WEIGHT

Just over half of young Indigenous women indicated that they were happy with their body weight in 2013:



2003; 2013 | AHS

DISORDERED EATING



33.3%

OF YOUNG WOMEN (BOTH INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS) – INDICATED THAT THEY HAD ENGAGED IN BINGE-EATING AT LEAST ONCE IN THE PAST YEAR

~1/10

REPORTED THAT THEY HAD PURGED AFTER EATING (13.5% FOR INDIGENOUS, 9% FOR NON-INDIGENOUS)

2013 | AHS

SEXUAL WELL-BEING AND REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

First Nations perspectives of wellness recognize sexuality as an inherent component of a young woman's holistic health and wellness. A girl's first period, or moon time, holds particular significance in many Nations.² Menstruation is considered a sacred and powerful time in a woman's cycle.¹⁰⁵

Pre-colonialism, young women were taught openly about their reproductive phase, about their power as life givers, and about their bodies. Changes experienced during puberty were celebrated and honoured through rites-of-passage ceremonies.

“Young women were taught many things. The most important thing they were taught was to have pride in their bodies and to be proud to be a woman. They were taught to respect their bodies, because their bodies were the ‘givers of life.’ [...] These things were taught to them about the time they were becoming young women, when their bodies were beginning to change.”

- Woman Elder¹⁰⁶

Many First Nations are reviving their cultural practices around puberty rites and ceremonies and re-establishing First Nations women's sexual health, which was repressed through colonialism. Youth have become leaders in the resurgence of traditional concepts and values around gender and sexuality; wholistic, respectful and autonomous sexuality.¹⁰⁷ A blended image of traditional and modern Indigenous sexualities is emerging.¹⁰⁷

Young First Nations women's sexual health continues to be threatened and undermined by intergenerational traumas and experiences of abuse and sexualized violence. Egregious practices such as coerced and forced sterilizations, birth alerts and unethical research on First Nations women and children have contributed to ongoing mistrust and fear when it comes to accessing sexual health services. This is compounded by the persistent racism, stereotypes and discrimination that First Nations women continue to experience in the medical system.

Another issue that undermines the sexual well-being of young First Nations women is inequitable access to culturally sensitive supports and reproductive health services. Youth who are trans, gender-diverse, or who identify as Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer or non-binary often face additional stereotypes and commonly experience a lack of care from a wholistic

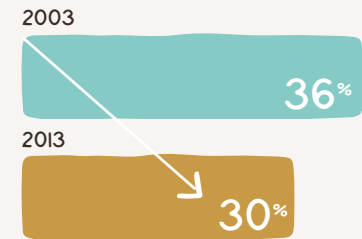
perspective. As reported in the *BELIEVE ME REPORT*, Indigenous peoples reported being viewed as drug users and sexually promiscuous, and having birth control pushed on them at young ages.¹⁰⁸ Those experiencing menstrual cycles also shared how the cultural significance of moon time and menstrual cycles were rarely considered or acknowledged by practitioners in prescribing birth control.¹⁰⁸

PROMISING PRACTICES

ASK AUNTIE is a free, interactive online platform that has been developed with input from Indigenous youth across BC. The program replicates the traditional learning style between an auntie or Elder and a youth, providing a safe space in which to talk about and relay cultural teachings around puberty and sexual health, the body and relationship safety. Communities adapt the program to the specific needs of their youth – and to incorporate the unique teachings of their own Nation.

HAVING SEX FOR THE FIRST TIME

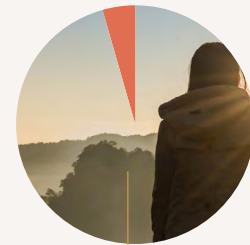
Indigenous youth (males and females) are waiting longer to have sexual intercourse :



THE PROPORTION REPORTING TO HAVE ENGAGED IN ORAL SEX REMAINED THE SAME²¹

2003; 2013 | AHS

USE OF CONTRACEPTION



95.8%

THE VAST MAJORITY OF SEXUALLY ACTIVE YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN USED SOME FORM OF CONTRACEPTION THE LAST TIME THEY HAD SEX

2013 | AHS

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTION RATES (STIs)

THE RATE OF STIs AMONG FEMALE FIRST NATIONS YOUTH DECREASED



BUT AT 3,175.8 PER 100,000 IN 2012/14, WAS STILL CONSIDERABLY HIGHER THAN THE RATE AMONG NON-FIRST NATIONS FEMALE YOUTH: 624.4 PER 100,000

2009/11; 2012/14 | BCCDC

PREGNANCY

Pregnancy is a sacred event in First Nations communities at all ages of conception. Many young First Nations mothers are well supported by their immediate and extended families. In mainstream culture, there is often judgement of teenage pregnancies and single parenthood. This stems from beliefs that early motherhood increases a woman’s vulnerability and can heighten the social and economic challenges she faces with respect to completing school, gaining employment, and earning an income.

Research has shown, however, that due to the culturally interrelated systems of care available to teenage mothers in Indigenous communities (particularly those living on reserve), Indigenous teenage lone mothers are not necessarily subject to the social and economic disadvantage that is often equated with early pregnancy.¹⁰⁹

In contrast, vulnerability has been found to be more closely linked to a woman’s place of residence, as this often dictates the employment and educational opportunities, the cost of housing and importantly, the mother’s ability to access and utilize various support networks: sisters, brothers, uncles, aunties, and grandparents – as well as community services.¹⁰⁹ Not all young First Nations mothers have these robust support systems, and early pregnancy and single parenthood can be extremely challenging.

TEENAGE PREGNANCIES



**PREGNANCY RATES
AMONG FIRST NATIONS
YOUTH DECLINED
STEADILY BETWEEN
2007–09 AND 2013–15**

2007-09; 2013-15 | BC Vital Stats; MSP

2013–15

Pregnancy rates among First Nations youth:

47.4
PER 1,000
VS
For Other Residents
10.6
PER 1,000

ABORTION



**RATES OF ABORTION
DECREASED AMONG
FIRST NATIONS YOUTH
BETWEEN 1995–97
AND 2013–15**

1995-97 ; 2013-15 | BC Vital Stats; MSP

MENTAL WELLNESS AND NURTURING SPIRIT

Youth is an important time to nurture the physical, emotional, and spiritual balance that is foundational for mental wellness. This balance is enhanced through strong connections with culture, family and community. Young women talk about the importance of spending time in nature, eating well, staying active, and being with their Elders.

As adolescents, First Nations young women are in a phase of development when both the nature of the stresses they experience and how they respond to that stress changes.¹¹⁰ Many young people experience heightened stress as they transition into and through their teens,¹¹¹ and these stresses can be particularly acute for those who do not feel as though they conform to prevailing cultural norms with respect to their sexual and/or gender identity.¹¹²

“An Elder helped me to connect my anger, my powerlessness, to my depression. She said, ‘It is pressing you down and an extra weight for you to carry. You need to find ways to move that energy – ways to let it go.’ I talked it out with my counsellor. I chopped wood, I walked ... I did many different things to just move the anger out of me.”

- YCW¹¹⁶

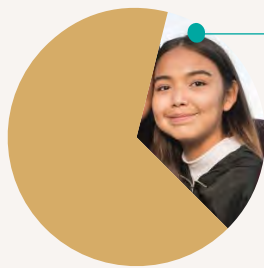
Research has shown that the majority of mental health issues and disorders onset prior to the age of 25.¹¹³ Left untreated, issues such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders can impede all aspects of health, including emotional well-being and social development, leaving young people feeling socially isolated, stigmatized, and unable to meet their potential and realize their goals.¹¹⁴

Many young First Nations young women living across BC are happy and thriving in connection with their communities and the land. But for some, intergenerational trauma and socio-economic inequities related to the effects of systemic discrimination, colonization, residential schools, land appropriation, Indian hospitals, and child welfare intrusion have caused significant harms and stresses. Young women impacted by these adverse experiences either directly or indirectly face greater barriers when it comes to establishing and maintaining balance in their lives. They are also more susceptible to problems associated with their mental wellness.¹¹⁵

“I have faced many struggles in my life that I have triumphed over but I have also faced struggles that took me a lot longer to overcome. I find it is okay to have rough patches, it is okay to fall back into yourself but always remember you have the strength to come back. I’ve had some low-lows and I always try to be light on myself and recognize that my wellness journey is never going to end. There’s no finish line, I will always be moving forward to better myself even when I feel like I’ve gone backwards. I try to remember that last year looked so different and the year before that, and the year before that because I am constantly changing and trying to evolve myself and that is what’s important.”

- Clea Schooner, Heiltsuk First Nation²⁷

SELF-RATED MENTAL HEALTH



33.4%

OF YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN RATED THEMSELVES AS BEING IN EITHER “GOOD” OR “EXCELLENT” MENTAL HEALTH

PERCENTAGE OF YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN WHO RATED THEMSELVES IN “GOOD” OR “EXCELLENT” MENTAL HEALTH

THOSE WHO NEVER WENT TO BED HUNGRY

71%

THOSE WHO SOMETIMES WENT TO BED HUNGRY

41%



2013 | AHS

STRESS, DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

Ratings of stress, depression and anxiety by young Indigenous women:

● **77.6%** no feelings of depression

● **80.6%** no anxiety disorders or panic attacks

● **80.1%** not ever feeling extremely stressed in the past month



2013 | AHS

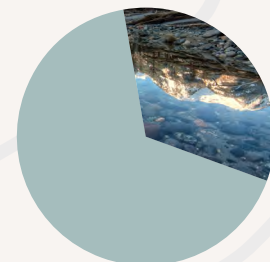
SELF-HARM

In some cases, those experiencing intense emotional pain and psychological distress harm themselves as a way of coping or responding to the pain.¹¹⁷ Self-harm, which can include cutting, biting, burning, and scratching oneself, is sometimes used as a means to gain control over one’s body,¹¹⁸ as a form of self-punishment, or as a means to release tension.¹¹⁹ For those who have been socialized to conceal anger, self-harming may also be a way of turning that anger and stress inwards.¹¹⁹ In instances of deep trauma and suffering, this pain can result in the tragic loss of life by suicide.

Incidences of self-harm are very often indicative of much deeper, underlying issues of collective suffering and injustice related to intergenerational and contemporary trauma. Sadly, self-harming behaviours commonly start during early adolescence¹¹⁷ – and are significantly more common among woman-identifying¹¹⁷ and trans youth than among males.¹²⁰ Young Indigenous women are overrepresented among those at risk for self-harming behaviour.

33.4%

OF INDIGENOUS FEMALES WHO COMPLETED THE AHS INDICATED THAT THEY HAD PURPOSELY CUT OR INJURED THEMSELVES AT LEAST ONCE IN THE PAST YEAR



2013 | AHS

SUBSTANCE USE

Adolescence is a time when some youth begin to experiment with substances such as alcohol and drugs. For many, their use is recreational and does not lead to long-term health outcomes. For others, however, early onset substance use can increase their risk of developing dependence and substance abuse. Youth living with trauma and intergenerational trauma may use substances to help numb their pain and temporarily relieve emotional distress.¹²¹ Youth will be influenced by the coping skills and approaches of the adults in their lives, some of whom might be able to moderate their usage.¹²² However, because the adolescent brain and physiology is still in development and therefore more vulnerable to injury, the risks associated with using many types of substances are higher for youth than they are for adults.

Commercial tobacco, for example, has been linked to more than 24 diseases and health conditions, including cancer, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, emphysema, depression, anxiety and mood disorders, and those who start to smoke commercial tobacco at a young age have been found to be more likely to experience greater degrees of nicotine dependence and difficulty quitting.¹²³ Similarly, cannabis use that begins early in adolescence, is frequent, and continues over time has been associated with increased risk of harms,¹²⁴ including the development of psychotic symptoms and disorders, with an enhanced vulnerability to psychosis.¹²⁵ Some of those harms may not be fully reversible.¹²⁶

Since 2016, British Columbia has been experiencing an overdose death epidemic due to an increasingly toxic illicit drug supply. While youth are not disproportionately impacted, this toxicity increases the risk of overdose death for both youth and adults who use drugs both recreationally and habitually.

RESPECTING TOBACCO

For thousands of years, natural tobacco has been an integral part of ritual, ceremony and prayer in many First Nations. In recent years, First Nations youth have demonstrated leadership in restoring respect around the use of tobacco and in curbing rates of smoking in their communities.¹²⁷ Nicotine is the addictive chemical in tobacco that makes it difficult to quit. Vaping has introduced a new nicotine delivery system that is gaining popularity among youth in some communities and stalling progress on nicotine addictions.^{128,129}

PROMISING PRACTICES

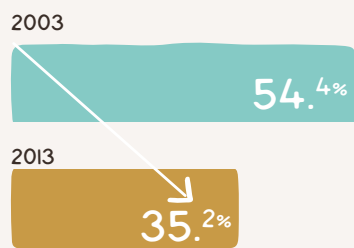
In 2017, Indigenous youth from communities across BC created a series of [VIDEOS](#) about what they were doing or planning to do to change the impact of commercial tobacco on their lives and/or the lives of their friends, families and communities.



SMOKING



THE PROPORTION OF YOUNG INDIGENOUS WOMEN WHO HAD EVER TRIED SMOKING COMMERCIAL CIGARETTES DROPPED



2003; 2013 | AHS

“I think it’s

important to share the message of not smoking and build awareness of peer pressure because it happens daily with many youth ... I just want to show everybody that smoking, and the use of other drugs, isn’t the answer. Being in an anti-smoking commercial felt really good, I felt amazing because I got to be a part of that message and maybe be the change for some other youth – maybe one day help them.”

- Tyneshia Commodore, Soowahlie¹³⁰

First Nations understand that a person’s mental distress is intimately connected to other dimensions of individual and collective wellness.¹³¹ Community-based approaches to issues such as anxiety and depression often involve the collective with a view of restoring well-being within the individual in the context of their relationships to others, to the land and to the teachings.¹³¹ Activities such as spending time on the land, for example, can help protect against mental health challenges by promoting self-reliance and self-confidence and providing opportunities for mentorship and community involvement.³² Knowledge of Indigenous languages has been shown to have a positive influence on youth mental wellness.¹³² Community-level factors such as self-government, involvement in land claims, band control over education, child welfare and health services, fire and police services, and the presence of cultural facilities – have similarly been found to be associated with lower rates of youth suicide.¹³³

“I was really struggling with a bad addiction to alcohol and I was using some other types of drugs. I went down to the fire pit and talked to an Elder and we’re talking for a bit and she told me to keep on going in life. Just talking to an Elder will help you to go on the right pathway and sometimes life gets hard, but you keep on going and don’t give up because everybody cares about you and you’re a warrior, you should stay strong. Talk to an Elder, or a teacher, or somebody that really cares, ‘cause I matter, you matter, we matter.”

- Mary Modeste, Coast Salish, Quwut’sun (Cowichan) Territory¹³⁴

In mainstream culture, mental health issues are compartmentalized and focus primarily on the individual. First Nations women have less access to culturally safe mental health and substance-use treatments. Racism leads to legitimate fears of incarceration and/or child apprehension, which can also deter young women from seeking supports and services.⁸⁰

As a result of the ongoing racism and intergenerational trauma that places First Nations women at greater risk of using substances and creates barriers to them accessing support and services, young Indigenous women also face a higher risk of dying from a drug overdose.

ALCOHOL AND SUBSTANCE USE 🖐️



2015/17 | RHS

94.1%
OF YOUNG FIRST NATIONS WOMEN ABSTAINED FROM USING ANY ILLICIT SUBSTANCES IN THE PAST YEAR

BETWEEN 2003 AND 2013, THE AHS FOUND AN INCREASING PROPORTION OF INDIGENOUS YOUTH WERE ABSTAINING FROM USING ALCOHOL AND OTHER SUBSTANCES

2003; 2013 | AHS



CONCLUSION

First Nations young women are sacred. As adolescents, young women are transitioning into their roles as adults and life givers. It is a time of increased independence and agency, when young women have greater opportunity to apply what they have learned through their childhood and make their own life style choices. It is also often when young women further develop their personal, social, sexual and cultural identities. The connections a young woman makes as she navigates this phase of her life can help lay the foundations of health and wellness through her adulthood and old age. Developing and nurturing deep roots in community and in culture is important, as they provide support as well as a strong sense of belonging and purpose. They can also help young First Nations women cope with the racism and other barriers they will likely face within the colonialist systems they must interact with to meet their basic needs.

Young First Nations women are increasingly applying their wisdom and creativity to resist and speak out against persistent injustices. There are also many proudly leading work in their Nations to revitalize their language and restore connections to land and ceremony. These are the future matriarchs of First Nations communities and, surrounded by the support and teachings of their mothers, aunts, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, they hold a vital role in the continuance and rebuilding of future of First Nations communities.



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