



About  
the  
URBAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLES STUDY

ENVIRONICS  
• INSTITUTE •

The Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study (UAPS) began to take shape when Michael Adams, founder and president of Environics Research Group and the non-profit Environics Institute, and David Newhouse, Chair of Indigenous Studies at Trent University, found themselves at a conference discussing social change among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in Canada.

"The mission of the Environics Institute," Adams says, "is to survey people whose voices Canadians don't often hear. We had spoken to immigrant groups, youth, even the citizens of Afghanistan. People began to ask me, 'Where are the voices of Aboriginal peoples?'"

Around the same time, the 2006 census data were released; they indicated that a large and rapidly growing proportion of Aboriginal people in Canada were living in cities. "If the census is right, we have over half a million First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people living in Canadian cities. Does the average citizen have any image of who these people are, how they relate to their cities, what they are contributing, or what their challenges are? It's a huge blind spot. I don't think we know our Aboriginal neighbours," says Adams.

David Newhouse had also noticed a knowledge gap regarding Aboriginal peoples in Canada. "There is a lot of research out there, including research on Aboriginal people living in cities. But much of the research is social-service based: it sees these communities through the lens of some problem or need—not as complex, resilient groups. In talking to Michael, I had high hopes that we could do research that would offer a new picture of urban Aboriginal realities."

## Exploratory Conversations

Convinced that there was room for greater understanding in this area, Adams traveled across the country to have in-person conversations with a diverse range of people engaged with Aboriginal issues. His discussions included entrepreneurs, educators, activists, academics both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, authors, chiefs, and policy experts from across the political spectrum.

Although the research project remained unformed, a loose network of people who were supportive of the concept began to take shape. This group included Caroline Krause, former principal of Grandview Elementary School in Vancouver's downtown east side and now a member of the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia; Calvin Helin, a lawyer and author of *Dances with Dependency*; Roberta Jamieson, President and CEO of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation; and Peter Dinsdale, the president of the National Association of Friendship Centres. Over time, this group grew to include 20 people and was formalized as the UAPS Advisory Circle.

It was clear to the Environics Institute and the Advisory Circle that some kind of research with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people living in Canadian cities was timely and important. The next steps were to develop a sound methodology; reach out to prospective partners (such as universities and Friendship Centres); and to raise the money to make such an ambitious study possible.

## Money and Methodology

The Environics Institute hired Ginger Gosnell-Myers, a Vancouver-based researcher and member of the Nisga'a First Nation, as the UAPS project manager. Gosnell-Myers worked with a small team including Dr. Keith Neuman (Group Vice President, Public Affairs at Environics Research) and Dr. Doug Norris (Chief Demographer at Environics Analytics and the former Director General of Social and Demographic Statistics at Statistics Canada) to design a research proposal that would be presented at the Advisory Circle's first full meeting at the Forks in Winnipeg in September, 2007. The proposal was to address three groups: (1) First

Nations, Métis, and Inuit people living in ten Canadian cities; (2) National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation (NAAF) Scholarship recipients; and (3) Non-Aboriginal Canadians.

The Institute was also busy seeking funding from government, foundations, and corporations. All sponsors contributed with the understanding that supporting the UAPS financially did not entitle them to influence the research. "When Environics approached us, we saw a way of understanding these populations better—and enhancing our Urban Aboriginal Strategy—without coming into the cities with a government research project. We wanted to see what kind of research the Environics Institute and its Advisory Circle would do if we just stood back," said Fred Caron, Assistant Deputy Minister of the Office of the Federal Interlocutor. Other funders supported the project on the same terms; the Environics Institute was accountable first and foremost to the Advisory Circle and to the individuals who participated in the study.

At this time, Gosnell-Myers and her team were beginning to reach out to prospective partners in the various cities. In some cities, it would have been impossible to reach the necessary number of respondents without the support and collaboration of a range of local Aboriginal organizations, including Friendship Centres. Although many organizations were receptive to participating, some were wary, fearing that a non-Aboriginal research organization would not approach their communities in a respectful way. "There is a long history of outsiders coming in and examining Aboriginal people," explains David Newhouse. "There were times at the beginning when I wondered whether people would reject this study outright. Fortunately, that didn't happen."

Those who supported the project were also cautious. When asked to describe their early concerns about the study, nearly everyone involved with the UAPS says that getting the methodology right was their main preoccupation. As Noella Steinhauer of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation puts it, "You start a project like this and think, 'Here we go again. Will the voices be authentic? Will the findings be contextualized appropriately?' Sometimes non-Aboriginal people hear what Aboriginal people are saying but they don't really get it. In the end, I do think the UAPS has captured real voices. Communicating what we heard is the next challenge."

Others involved with the study had more to add. "In terms of methodology, this was among the most ambitious studies I have worked on," says Keith Neuman. "The first big issue was finding a sample that genuinely reflected the Aboriginal population in each city, since no sampling frame exists for the urban Aboriginal population."

The UAPS team worked to capture voices from across the socio-economic spectrum, people with different levels of education, and people belonging to different identity groups (Métis and Inuit as well as a diversity of First Nations). "There are two dangers," says John Richards of Simon Fraser University's Public Policy Program. "On one hand, you can have a sample of people who are thriving and you miss the people who are struggling. The opposite danger is that you miss the people who are doing well—and that's easy to do because they are unlikely to be connected to social service agencies targeting Aboriginal people. In that case you get a picture that hides the successes that many Aboriginal people are experiencing. I think our sample reflects a very honest effort to get the full picture."

Lawyer and author Calvin Helin reflects on the same issue from a personal perspective: "I work with a lot of Aboriginal kids who are really poor—and my focus was on making sure we heard those voices in the study. Looking at the data, though, I also saw people who looked like me and my Aboriginal law school classmates. I had been so intent on ensuring these downtown east side kids were represented that I almost forgot: I'm part of this picture too."

Overall, the sample came close to representing the urban Aboriginal population as the census reflects it. Interviewers strove to include marginalized members of Aboriginal communities, conducting interviews with homeless respondents in parks, and going door to door in neighbourhoods where phones were rare. Ultimately, it was identity group representation more than socio-economic representation that proved the greatest challenge. The study set the goal of speaking to equal numbers of Métis and First Nations participants in Western cities; in some cities reaching the Métis sampling targets was a slow process. The UAPS reached its Métis representation goals overall, but fell short of its targets in Halifax, Montreal, and Saskatoon.

"This study isn't perfect," says Al Benoit of the Manitoba Métis Federation, "But I think there was a heartfelt commitment to understanding the issues that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples are experiencing in the urban environment. As a result, I think this study has given us a baseline to go on. You can always wish for more: more depth, more representation, and so on. This is a good start."

## Inviting openness

### *Thoughtful questions, Aboriginal interviewers, face to face conversations*

In addition to locating and engaging a representative sample of urban Aboriginal people, there was the question of whether people would be willing to participate and speak candidly. Ginger Gosnell-Myers says that inviting honesty from study participants was a major preoccupation for her team at the beginning of the project. "Some of this is sensitive material. We made sure that participants knew they were in control and could stop the interview at any time." As the interviews progressed, however, her concerns were alleviated. "Every person answered every question. Our interviewers would get to the end of an hour-long survey, and the person they were interviewing would say, 'Can we keep talking?' That just doesn't happen in survey research." Gosnell-Myers says that in her mind, this was a sign that the UAPS was asking the right questions at the right time. "These were questions people really wanted to answer—questions people were glad to be asked."

Representatives of both the Advisory Circle and Environics Institute agree that, in addition to respectful questions, two other factors were crucial to making study participants feel at ease. The first was that nearly all the interviewers were themselves Aboriginal. Over a hundred Aboriginal people, some of them students in the social sciences, were hired and trained to carry out the hundreds of interviews that constitute the UAPS. In each city, a project coordinator (in most cases an Aboriginal person) was hired to manage the interviewers, connect with local Aboriginal organizations, and communicate with Gosnell-Myers and her fellow coordinator Vina Wolf.

By training and supporting mainly Aboriginal interviewers and city coordinators, the Environics Institute added a significant element of local capacity-building to the study. It also made participants feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives. "I actually wasn't worried about getting the data," says Noella Steinhauer. "Once I knew that Aboriginal people were doing the interviews and leading the research in the cities, I was confident our people would talk to them." Evelyn Peters, Professor and Canada Research Chair in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Saskatchewan, agrees: "The coordinators approached people in a way that was respectful. I'm not surprised that people took the opportunity. They probably saw that this was a chance to say something not only to the rest of Canada, but also to other Aboriginal peoples."

Many UAPS advisors believe that a second reason for respondents' candour was that the interviews were conducted in person—not over the telephone, as is standard practice for most national polling. The decision to conduct the interviews face to face was a crucial one for the UAPS. Looking back, some Advisory Circle members see this as a make-or-break moment for the study. When the Environics Institute team arrived at The Forks for the first full Advisory Circle meeting, they presented a plan to survey urban Aboriginal peoples by telephone and then follow up with in-depth, in-person interviews with a selected sample of telephone respondents. Several members of the Advisory Circle objected. Not only did they worry that covering sensitive issues over the telephone would be disrespectful, they raised the concern that limiting the survey to people who had phones would in itself introduce a huge bias: "Some of our people don't have phones. That's the reality," said Jennifer Rattray, the University of Winnipeg's first Executive Director of Government, Indigenous and Community Affairs and a member of the Peepeekisis First Nation.

Over the course of the meeting, agreement emerged that in-person interviews would be ideal. This approach, however, would bring an already ambitious project to a new level of difficulty, complexity, and cost. Fortunately, the Environics Institute was able to attract further financial support for the study—some from new sources, and some from the project's original funders. "We were lucky to have supporters who understood that we would be learning as we went, and that our approach would have to evolve," says Michael Adams. "The switch to in-person interviews was the most significant case of us saying, 'Our original plan is not the best path. We have to listen to our Advisory Circle and change our approach in substantive ways. And by the way: this is going to be more expensive.'"

## The Findings Emerge

Ultimately, the UAPS coordinators and Sarah Robertson, Senior Research Associate at Environics Research, managed a research process that involved 2,614 interviews with Métis, Inuit and First Nations (status and non-status) individuals living in eleven Canadian cities: Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Montreal, Halifax and Ottawa (Inuit only). These were conducted from March to October of 2009. Interviews with 182 NAAF scholars were also completed; the Environics Institute sees the NAAF study as a pilot that will lead to further research. Finally, 2,501 non-Aboriginal Canadians were surveyed by phone on their attitudes toward Aboriginal people and issues.

Sonya Kunkel, Vice President Public Affairs at Environics Research and the author of the study report, says that although the challenges of gathering the data were considerable, making sense of the data was also a huge task. "We used a lot of open-ended questions, which enable people to express themselves with more richness. The job is to approach these thousands and thousands of answers and synthesize them in a way that respects the complexity of the issues, and that honours all the people we spoke to." A vital part of approaching the data respectfully, Kunkel says, was to have a fully Aboriginal-owned and -operated research organization (Acosys Consulting) oversee the coding of participants' answers. After Kunkel had prepared a preliminary draft report, the Advisory Circle convened once again at the Forks in Winnipeg in the fall of 2009 to discuss the results and to crystallize the central themes that run through the data.

The findings of the study are reported in a number of documents on this site, and are being released through UAPS media partners that include the CBC, and *The Globe and Mail*.

## What the data make possible

"You can't do anything without good information; it's as simple as that," says Al Benoit. "For programs, for policies, for everything—you need to gather the evidence if you're going to make good decisions and be effective."

Like Benoit, those who have supported the UAPS see the data as a potential starting point for a range of initiatives: organizing and capacity-building in the cities studied; dialogue among Aboriginal networks and organizations about urban realities in different parts of the country; policy discussions at all levels of government; public dialogue; and, of course, further research.

Currently, the Environics Institute is preparing to begin an engagement process in the eleven cities that shared their insights and told their stories. "A huge community of people has been touched by this process," says Michael Adams. "Our advisors and funders, our dozens of Aboriginal research partners, and of course the more than 2,600 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people who generously gave their time to talk to us. Our responsibility now is to make sure that this information goes back to those communities and is shared with the greatest respect for those who offered it. On an ordinary survey, there is no engagement process; you release the data and that's the end of it. With this study, it's vital that we return to the communities."

In addition to advancing policy discussions and informing the Canadian conversation about social changes among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, some have suggested the UAPS may plant the seeds for increased solidarity and pride among urban Aboriginal peoples. Ginger Gosnell-Myers says, "When urban Aboriginal peoples are researched it's often about problems like homelessness and sexual exploitation. There are hundreds of thousands of us living in cities, and there are a lot of positive things happening in our communities; it's not all crisis. But unless someone comes along and says, 'This is interesting. Tell me about your choices, tell me about your community,' then people don't notice that they're part of a wider social change. It's just life."

