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LIARD  
ABORIGINAL  
WOMEN'S  
SOCIETY

## YOUTH FOR SAFETY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Beringia Community Planning Inc.





# YOUTH FOR SAFETY PROJECT NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

Youth for Safety is a three year youth empowerment project designed to foster community safety and justice for young women and girls centered on the town of Watson Lake, Yukon and nearby Kaska First Nations populations in Two Mile area, Upper Liard and Lower Post, BC. This project was initiated by the Liard Aboriginal Women's Society (LAWS), a non-profit, charitable, community-based, aboriginal organization providing social development services to the Kaska Nation in the Yukon and northern British Columbia. The project recognizes the need for active female and male youth participation in addressing issues of violence against young women and girls, and is designed to provide youth with the knowledge and skills needed to assume a leadership role in promoting safety and justice for youth women and girls, youth to youth and within the community at large. The focus of the project is providing support to young women and girls (under 18) who are at risk of falling victim to sexual/physical violence through empowerment and advocacy and engaging the community at large.

This document summarizes literature, statistics, project history and participant knowledge in order to support the need for this project and refine the approach being used. Key points from this assessment are as follows:

- Statistics around violence against Aboriginal women and girls in Canada are staggering. These are particularly acute in the North.
- The literature points to root causes of this violence: our colonial history, economic and social marginalization, and inadequate support and services.
- The literature calls for programs that offer supports to victims and community-based education that explores the root causes of violence.
- It also highlights the need for innovative collaborations between community agencies to respond to and prevent family sexualized violence.
- Research focused on youth engagement and community safety highlights the opportunity to engage youth as leaders of community safety initiatives.
- In the Yukon, a series of incidents involving violence against First Nations by the police led to a Police Review which identified systemic issues that compromise the safety of First Nations women and girls.
- In concert with the RCMP, women's organizations and Kaska women, LAWS spearheaded a community-based collaborative movement, Together for Justice, to restore the dignity of women who have been abused. In particular, to understand how language is used to conceal violence and to understand the impact of negative and positive social response on individuals who have been subjected to violence. This process led to the signing of a Safety Protocol Agreement between LAWS and the Watson Lake RCMP.
- In Watson Lake specifically, crime rates are higher than in other Yukon communities. About half of the population is First Nation. The community's social development programming needs are underserved, especially when it comes to support for Youth.
- Watson Lake Youth identify drugs and alcohol, crime and violence and limited social supports as threats to safety for women and girls. Partner agency representatives identify a disconnect between Youth and services, lack of adult role models, drugs and alcohol and negative peer pressure as threats to safety.
- The Youth for Safety Project evolved as one element of the Together for Justice Project and aims to focus specifically on empowering Youth to be active participants in building safety and justice for women and girls in their community.
- This project aims to respond to the need for:
  - a community-based collaboration to fight violence against women and girls
  - a program that helps Youth and community members understand the root causes of violence
  - specific supports for Watson Lake Youth and victims of violence to become empowered



## Liard Aboriginal Women's Society Youth for Safety Project Needs Assessment

- opportunities for Youth to take leadership roles in building a safer community
- To respond to these needs the program uses a collaborative, peer-network, empowerment, strengths-based and response-based practice approach to deliver a 5 module program over 3 years.
- The objectives of the program are to:
  - demonstrate and assess an empowerment model of mixed-gender, youth-based peer support in the prevention of sexual violence against young women and girls by men and boys in the context of an isolated, northern aboriginal community, contributing to the research into best practices in addressing the issue in similar community contexts, nationally
  - develop a response-based understanding among a cadre of male and female youth of the issue and prevention of sexual violence against girls and young women by men and boys, and to involve the cadre of male and female youth in engaging other youth and the community at large in the response-based understanding and prevention of sexual violence against girls and young women by men and boys
- The desired results of the program are the following:
  - Project participants have an increased understanding of issues relating to sexual violence against women and girls
  - Project participants have gained/strengthened skills to identify and respond to issues relating to violence against women and girls in their communities
  - Men and boys actively engage and take on leadership roles to address the issue of sexual violence against women and girls in the community
  - Community members have increased their awareness of issues relating to gender-based violence

## NATIONAL CONTEXT

### THE STATS- VIOLENCE AGAINST ABORIGINAL WOMEN AND GIRLS

Violence against Aboriginal women and girls has been repeatedly identified as a National crisis in Canada. Consistent pressure from Aboriginal and Women advocates have led to the recent launch of a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The National statistics are grim. Aboriginal women and girls are three times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to report having been a victim of violent crime (Statistics Canada, 2011). Not only do Indigenous women face more frequent incidence of violence, the violence is also much more severe. A 2011 Statistics Canada report suggests that the national homicide rate for Indigenous women is at least seven times higher than for non-Indigenous women. The Native Women's Association of Canada estimates that roughly 600 indigenous women and girls in Canada have gone missing or have been murdered over the last two decades. The majority of these cases remain unsolved (AFN, 2013). The representation of Aboriginal women in the prison system has increased by nearly 90% over the last 10 years, making them the fastest-growing offender group (AFN, 2013).

### THE CAUSES

Creation of the reserve system, residential schools, mass adoption policies and other social injustices have had significant effects on Canada's Aboriginal communities which are felt to this day. As a result, Aboriginal communities suffer high crime rates, low employment and relatively poor economic prosperity (Christmas, 2012).

In 2015, researchers Feinstein and Pearce reviewed 58 studies, reports and inquiries that examined the causes of violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada. They concluded that there is consistent consensus with respect to the causes of violence against Indigenous women, and that this issue is a sociological one rooted in



economic and social marginalization and chronic underfunding of services to help Indigenous women cope with these circumstances. The poverty and discrimination experienced by Indigenous women is a product of continuing racism and sexism in Canada. The lack of culturally sensitive programs prevent police and health care professionals to address challenges specific to Indigenous women's experiences. These issues are compounded by an unresponsive justice system.

The review found that 28 of these reports stress the importance of properly resourced, Indigenous-specific programs to address both the causes of violence against Indigenous women and to provide support and services to women and girls who have experienced violence and their families. Other recommendations that relate to this project include greater involvement of Indigenous peoples in program development and delivery and greater public education efforts.

As stated in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples report (1996) "Any analysis of violence against women must include recognition of the complex ways in which inequality and power imbalances structure the lives of Canadian women. Only such an understanding can lead to ways of ending violence against women". This points to the need for community-based education supporting participants to examine the root causes of violence.

Research on the role of Youth in promoting community safety points to the need for youth engagement in community decision-making as a public response to violence. A broad body of research indicates that youth engagement reduces the likelihood of interpersonal violence and delinquency, while concurrently promoting community membership and the development of positive youth competencies and emotional well being (Zeldin, 2004).

## YUKON AND NORTHERN CONTEXT

Rates of violence against women are particularly high in the Yukon. Compared to the provinces, rates of sexual offences against women are 2-3 times higher in the Yukon than in the provinces. Indigenous women experience spousal assault at rates more than three times higher than for non-Aboriginal women or for men. The number of women who accessed shelters to escape violence in Canada was 21 per 100,000 in 2008. In Yukon the rate was 234 per 100,000 (Richardson, 2013). A 2013 Human Rights Watch report explores the relationship between the RCMP and indigenous women and girls in northern BC, and uncovered allegations of sexual assault by police officers and a widely perceived failure of the police to protect women and girls from violence. The report highlighted how fear of retaliation from police runs high in the north. "Those Who Take Us Away" the title of the Human Rights Watch report is a literal translation of the word for police in Carrier.

In March 2010, two RCMP constables (Sean McLaughlin and Graham Belak) were acquitted after having testified in court they had engaged in multiple sexual acts with a young nurse new to the community of Watson Lake. Also in March 2010, a Coroner's inquest began into the death of Raymond Silverfox, a First Nations man from Carmacks who died in RCMP cells under degrading and inhumane conditions (Yukon Women's Groups, 2010). LAWS and the Yukon Status of Women Council (YSWC) wrote to the RCMP in Whitehorse and the Commissioner in Ottawa to express concerns (Yukon Women's Groups, 2010) and eventually, these incidents and the public response led to a Yukon review of the police force.

The mandate of the 2010 Review of Yukon's Police Force was to engage in a dialogue with Yukon people and collaboratively develop solutions that will encourage trust between citizens and the police force. The review found that women fear Yukon's police force and that the RCMP fail to respond appropriately when they report physical or sexualized assault (Yukon Women's Groups, 2010). Fear of reprisal prevents women from speaking publicly or

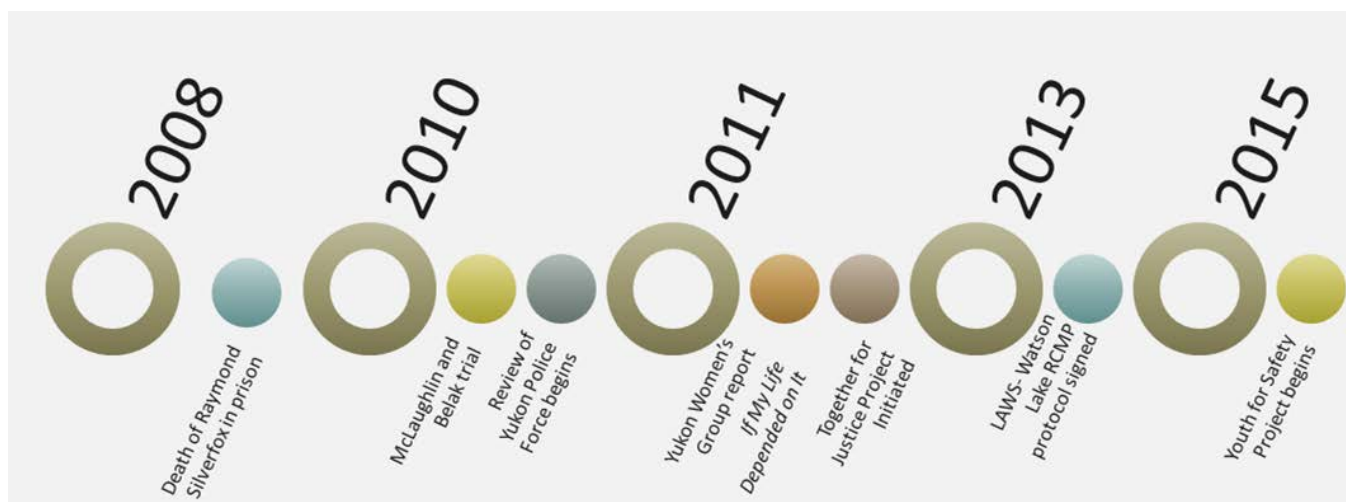


making a complaint to the RCMP. Fear of being charged for defending themselves, of losing custody of their children also prevents women from reporting violence. Women report police attitudes that unjustly blame women for male violence (Yukon Women's Groups, 2011).

## TOGETHER FOR JUSTICE

In concert with the RCMP, women's organizations and Kaska women, LAWS spearheaded a community-based collaborative movement, Together for Justice, to restore the dignity of women who have been abused, to understand how language is used to conceal violence and to understand the impact of negative and positive social response on individuals, especially women, who have been subjected to violence.

The Together for Justice Project evolved as a response to various violence-related community concerns in and around Watson Lake and was designed to improve community policing and to develop better relationships between RCMP and Indigenous women. Workshops explored the role of language in misrepresenting those who have been harmed and the role of social responses to violence (Richardson, 2013). Facilitators of Together for Justice explored the role of language in misrepresenting those who have been harmed and the role of social responses to violence. They engaged participants in conversations that honoured their resistance, and honoured women and their history of resistance to violence (Richardson, 2013). Many of the officers involved left the process with a heightened attention to avoiding victim-blaming and honouring the dignity of those who have been harmed (Richardson, 2013). After a two year process of facilitated workshops and discussions a protocol agreement between LAWS and the Watson Lake RCMP was signed in March 2013. This project is celebrated as an example of the type of innovative collaboration needed to respond to and prevent family violence (Nextpoint Collaborative, 2016).







## WATSON LAKE AND KASKA NATION CONTEXT

The community of interest of this project includes the Town of Watson Lake, Yukon and the surrounding area including Kaska First Nations residents in the Two Mile area adjacent to Watson Lake and Kaska First Nations residents in Upper Liard, Yukon and in Lower Post, British Columbia.

Watson Lake has a population of about 800 people, approximately half self-identify as Aboriginal (Yukon Community Profiles, 2013). Reported crime rates historically have been significantly higher in Watson Lake than in other Yukon communities. Reported crime rates per 1000 residents were about 4x times higher in Watson Lake than in Whitehorse between 2003-2008 (Liard First Nation Community Profile, 2010). As a small, remote community, Watson Lake has under-resourced and oversubscribed social development services. In addition, these social development services are generally geared toward providing services within an adult context.

LAWS identified several systemic issues that influence gender-based roles and power relationships that factor into sexual violence against girls and young women in the community including:

- (a) the intergenerational effects of residential school and colonialism;
- (b) popular culture and youth sub-culture, media, and virtual technology influences;
- (c) social isolation (separation/exclusion) including isolation due to age and gender, isolation from family and community, isolation from appropriate community support services and life-style alternatives, and the isolation effects of virtual technology.

In January 2016, 22 Youth for Safety participants responded to a survey about their personal safety. Just under half of students (42%) surveyed for this project reported having a personal safety issue in their life. 50% of the female students reported having a personal safety issues, while 33% of male students reported having a safety issue<sup>1</sup>. 53% of students identified that they had a friend or relative with a safety issue. Safety issues students identified experiencing include bullying, drugs/alcohol, physical abuse and verbal abuse<sup>2</sup>.

When discussing the theme of safety in their community, 64 Youth for Safety participants identified the following threats to their safety during workshops in November and December 2015:

**Drugs and alcohol-** underage drinking, public intoxication

**Crime and violence-** fighting, sexual assault, abduction, vandalism, illegal weapons

**Lack of support-** having someone to talk to, watching out for each other, counselling

Participants identified the need for more safety initiatives (such as police patrols, neighbourhood watch, safety cameras, safe places), more arts and recreation programs (such as camps, recreation centres), anti-drug/alcohol initiatives (more controls for purchase of alcohol, more treatment options) and initiatives that helped build community support and respect (respect for Elders, anger management, listening to each other).

Partner agency representatives identify a disconnect between Youth and services, lack of adult role models, drugs and alcohol and negative peer pressure as threats to safety. They highlight the need for more recreation and activities, healthy adults and mentors, and less social isolation.

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<sup>1</sup> The student who identified their gender as other did not report a personal safety issue.

<sup>2</sup> These stats from January workshop, and not particularly strong, perhaps we should omit from needs assessment



## YOUTH FOR SAFETY PROJECT

Since the signing of the protocol, First Nations, community agencies and the RCMP have continued to meet and work together on community justice issues. Both have committed to working together to increase capacity to respond to violence against women.

The Youth for Safety Project evolved as one element of the Together for Justice Project and aims to focus specifically on empowering Youth to be active participants in building safety and justice for women and girls in their community. This three year project involves 5 modules of curriculum to be delivered to a group of core female and male, Kaska and non-Kaska students at Watson Lake Secondary School. The approach to this project is one of empowerment, response-based practice and peer support.

**Empowerment-** The knowledge, skill and control needed to address the risks of violence to girls and young women must be shared with girls, youth women and youth generally, not only as means of self preservation, but as a means of creating safe community through the informed actions and advocacy of girls, young women and youth within their own cadre and within the wider community. The youth in this project are given the information and skills they need to be active participants in creating a safer community for women and girls.

**Response-based practice-** The Response-based practice approach to therapy and community work provides and promotes socially just and effective responses to violence and other forms of oppression and adversity. This approach focuses on the language used to respond to violence, and highlights how it is used to conceal violence, obscure offender responsibility, conceal victim's resistance and blame/pathologize victims. This approach honours the ways that victims resist violence and aims to create positive social responses to violence to help victims maintain dignity and recover more fully.

**Peer support-** Central to this project is the trust and relationship building built into the curriculum. This peer support network is crucial to building commitment to the project, creating a safe space for Youth to open up and support one another and build the social support network that will allow the project's effects to be sustained well after the project is completed.

## OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: To demonstrate and assess an empowerment model of mixed-gender, youth-based peer support in the prevention of sexual violence against young women and girls by men and boys in the context of an isolated, northern aboriginal community, contributing to the research into best practices in addressing the issue in similar community contexts, nationally, by:

- A. Engaging and Establishing Working Partnerships: Utilizing the pre-existing Together for Justice interagency collaborative to engage and establish a project specific consultative group representing local men and women, male and female youth; other community organizations, community leaders, stakeholders and potential allies.
- B. Needs Assessment: Conducting a community-based needs assessment on the issue and prevention of sexual violence against young women and girls by men and boys, scanning relevant data, service observations and anecdotal responses from youth, adults, and Elders; quantifying and qualifying community-based supports as to service gaps, accessibility, age, cultural, gender and issue-related





responsiveness; and engaging local male and female youth in identifying their priorities, viewpoints and potential strategies in addressing gender-based violence through a mixed-gender, youth-based model of peer support aimed at the prevention of sexual violence against young women and girls by men and boys.

- C. Model Development: Developing an empowerment model of mixed-gender, youth-based peer support aimed at the prevention of sexual violence against young women and girls by men and boys, based on input from the above sources (A, B, and C) and on a response-based approach to social justice.
- D. Evaluation: Developing and implementing a comprehensive evaluation plan to track the progress of the pilot project over its life span and to provide a documented summary and assessment of the empowerment model of mixed-gender, youth-based peer support in the prevention of sexual violence against young women and girls by men and boys in the context of an isolated, northern aboriginal community upon completion.

Objective 2: To develop a response-based understanding among a cadre of male and female youth of the issue and prevention of sexual violence against girls and young women by men and boys, and to involve the cadre of male and female youth in engaging other youth and the community at large in the response-based understanding and prevention of sexual violence against girls and young women by men and boys, by:

- E. Implementation: Planning, organizing, implementing and overseeing the start-up of the pilot project including but not limited to: the identification and selection of a mixed-gender youth cadre; scheduling, space and facilitator arrangements; curriculum development; public relations; and participant pre-project orientation.
- F. Delivery: Coordinating, managing and facilitating participative response-based training/education sessions with the mixed-gender youth cadre on the issue and prevention of violence against girls and young women by men and boys, and on leadership and community development skills as they relate to developing peer, youth and community understanding of the issue and prevention of violence against girls and young women by men and boys; *and*, coordinating, managing and facilitating the development and implementation by the mixed-gender youth cadre, of response-based community development activities intended to develop youth and community understanding of the issue and prevention of violence against girls and young women by men and boys.

## RESULTS

The desired results of this project include:

- Project participants have an increased understanding of issues relating to sexual violence against women and girls
- Project participants have gained/strengthened skills to identify and respond to issues relating to violence against women and girls in their communities
- Men and boys actively engage and take on leadership roles to address the issue of sexual violence against women and girls in the community
- Community members have increased their awareness of issues relating to gender-based violence



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