

# EMPLOYMENT AS A SOCIAL DETERMINANT OF FIRST NATIONS, INUIT AND MÉTIS HEALTH

Employment and working conditions are a determinant of both physical and mental health. People who are unemployed, underemployed, or experiencing job insecurity suffer an increased risk of self-reported physical illness, cardiovascular disease, anxiety and depression, suicide, accident related injuries, and premature death.<sup>1</sup> Unemployment is also linked to an increase in unhealthy behaviors such as alcohol and tobacco consumption, poor nutrition, physical inactivity, aggression, as well as domestic problems like divorce and child abuse.<sup>2</sup> Job quality is equally important to overall health and wellbeing. Research shows that physical and psychological health suffers when people have little opportunity to use their skills and have low authority over decision-making.<sup>3</sup> For Aboriginal<sup>4</sup> people, who have an unemployment rate almost double that of non-Aboriginal Canadians, reducing employment disparities is critical to improving Aboriginal health outcomes.

## Aboriginal Employment Rates in Canada

Recent data from Statistics Canada's 2007 Labour Force Survey for Aboriginal people living off reserve indicates that, for all age groups combined, Aboriginal employment rates are at 59%, which is below the rate of 63.6% for non-Aboriginal people.<sup>5</sup> The rate of unemployment, by the same token, is reported to be at 10.6% which is well above the non-Aboriginal rate of 5.9%. Predictably, educational attainment was shown to be directly correlated with employment status. Employment rates for



off reserve Aboriginal people between the ages of 25 and 54 with a post-secondary degree was 80.2% compared to 70.4% for those who graduated from high school and 51.2% for those who had not finished high school.<sup>6</sup>

Employment status also varies depending on Aboriginal identity, geography, and gender. For example, in 2006 the employment rate was highest for urban Aboriginal people (at approximately 60%) and lowest for on-reserve Aboriginal people (approximately 39%).<sup>7</sup> In terms of Aboriginal identity, the employment rates were highest for Métis (64.1%) and lowest for First Nations (48.2%), particularly those on reserve (39.0%).<sup>8</sup> Aboriginal employment rates were highest

in Alberta, with greater disparities evident in Saskatchewan, Quebec and Manitoba.<sup>9</sup> With respect to gender, Aboriginal women are less likely to be employed compared to Aboriginal men and non-Aboriginal women, and are more likely to work in lower paying occupations such as sales or administration.<sup>10</sup> Métis women are more likely to be employed (60.0%) than other groups of Aboriginal women, and First Nations women are less likely to be employed (46.1%).<sup>11</sup> Métis women are also more likely to be employed than non-Aboriginal women (57.7%). Surprisingly, Inuit women were more likely than Inuit men to be employed (49.1% compared to 48.6%).<sup>12</sup> Inuit men had the highest unemployment rate of all identity groups and genders.



## Strategies To Reduce Barriers To Employment

The Aboriginal population has great potential for expanding the labor force because the population is young and growing, and rates of employment are still well below that of the non-Aboriginal population.<sup>13</sup> Strategies to improve the employment outcomes of Aboriginal people, however, will need to be multi-faceted in order to target the many factors that are limiting employment opportunities. Given the high proportion of children and youth in the Aboriginal demographic profile, investments in children and youth programs to enhance educational attainment, and to assist parents, is an obvious first step.<sup>14</sup> Increasing employment opportunities within Aboriginal communities through economic capacity building will also be essential. Important elements of this capacity building include good governance, access to and control of land and resources, business creation and access to capital, community infrastructure, development of partnerships, and education and skills training.<sup>15</sup> There will also need to be recognition by the federal government that current policy to provide services and programs only to the on-reserve population impedes Aboriginal people from finding meaningful employment opportunities. A great many jobs are available in the cities, and the current policy “forces a cruel choice: identity or employment.”<sup>16</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization (1998). Social determinants of health: The solid facts, R. Wilkinson and M. Marmot (Eds.). Geneva: WHO.

<sup>2</sup> Dooley, D., Fielding, J., & Levi, L. (1996). Health and unemployment. *Annual Review of Public Health* 17: 449-465.

<sup>3</sup> WHO, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Aboriginal’ throughout this fact sheet refers collectively to the Indigenous inhabitants of Canada, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples (as stated in section 35(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982). Wherever possible, we provide names and data for distinct groups/communities.

<sup>5</sup> Perusse, D. (2008). Aboriginal people living off-reserve and the labour market: Estimates from the Labour Force Survey, 2007. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, Catalogue no., 71-588-X.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada (2006). 2006 Census. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada Cat. No. 97-560-X2006031 (March 4, 2008 Tabulations).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Hull, J. (2001). Aboriginal women: A profile from the 2001 census. Winnipeg, MB: Proligica Research Inc..

<sup>11</sup> Statistics Canada (2006 Census). Cat. No. 97-560-X2006031.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Perusse, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Medelson, M. (2004). Aboriginal people in Canada's labor market: Work and employment today and tomorrow. Ottawa, ON: Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

<sup>15</sup> Sibbeston, N. (2006). Aboriginal involvement in economic development: Elements for success and obstacles to achievement, speech to Generating Opportunities and Wealth Conference, November. [http://www.sen.parl.gc.ca/nsibbeston/aboriginal\\_economic\\_development.htm#Generating\\_Opportunities\\_and\\_Wealth\\_Ottawa\\_2006](http://www.sen.parl.gc.ca/nsibbeston/aboriginal_economic_development.htm#Generating_Opportunities_and_Wealth_Ottawa_2006)

<sup>16</sup> Mendelson., p. 41.



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