



REGROUPEMENT
DES CENTRES D'AMITIÉ
AUTOCHTONES DU QUÉBEC

Repairing Relationships, Securing Life Paths: Building a Community-based Response Adapted to the Sexual Exploitation of Indigenous People in Urban Settings

Position paper submitted by the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (RCAAQ) as part of the consultation process intended to support the reflections of Quebec's Ministère de la Sécurité publique (MSP) and its partners on sexual exploitation.

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THE NATIVE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE MOVEMENT

In Quebec, it is necessary to look back to the 1970s to understand the many dimensions of Indigenous presence in urban centres and to trace its social, cultural, political and economic trajectories.

The Indigenous presence, which had long been unrecognized in society and ignored by governments, has emerged, catalyzed notably by the Native Friendship Centre Movement, which has been established in the province for more than 50 years.

In Canada, the Movement has been active for over 70 years. In the early years of their existence, Friendship Centres fulfilled two primary roles: first, they served as gathering places for Indigenous people living in urban areas, whose living conditions were often marked by poverty, isolation and very limited access to public services; second, they functioned as welcoming spaces for individuals from remote land-based communities (reserves) whose health status required hospitalization or access to specialized care outside their home communities.

This mission remains at the heart of the work carried out by Friendship Centres, as the Movement's philosophy is grounded in care and attentiveness. This mission has never wavered; on the contrary, it has strengthened over time and expanded into numerous areas. As a result, its leaders now direct and manage the largest urban service infrastructure dedicated to Indigenous populations in Quebec.

The Movement's main strength lies in its community roots. Whether 50 years ago or today, the existence of a Friendship Centre stems from a grassroots movement of people working together to create the means, leverage and opportunities to improve their living conditions and affirm their sense of belonging to an engaged and involved urban Indigenous community. Native Friendship Centres weave connections of equity, respect and solidarity day in and day out, to support their members at every step on their life path.

Well ahead of its time, the Quebec Native Friendship Centre Movement made cultural safety a central pillar of identity affirmation and a space for sociocultural engagement, in its efforts to fight against inequalities and in defence of urban Indigenous people's rights not only in health care but also in education, housing, employability and justice.

By structuring its action around the regeneration of Indigenous care and support practices, and by working alongside recognized Knowledge Keepers, the Movement continuously builds bridges of understanding and reconciliation, on the one hand, between the urban Indigenous population and Quebec society, and on the other, between Indigenous communities and Quebec government institutions.

In response to racism and discrimination, both past and present, the Movement offers constructive solutions and encourages dialogue. In the face of adversity and injustice, it opens new pathways of hope and wellness for its members and supports them in their efforts to regain stability and agency in their lives.



AFFILIATED NATIVE FRIENDSHIP CENTRES

In Quebec, 11 Native Friendship Centres and 3 community service points, brought together under the provincial RCAAQ banner, are present in 14 cities, where nearly one-third of the province's urban Indigenous population resides. Some Friendship Centres, with several decades of history, were founded in the 1970s. Since 2000, a second wave of Centres emerged in response to the expanding and diversifying urban Indigenous population and its increasing needs.

Native Friendship Centres carry out social, community and civic mandates and welcome Indigenous people of all genders and all ages. These organizations thus embody the founding principles of cultural safety from within. They constitute Indigenous spaces of cooperation and democratic deliberation; their collegial and participatory organizational culture emphasizes agency and innovation, and all of their actions are shaped by a commitment to sharing and a collective vision of wellness. Native Friendship Centres act as drivers of social cohesion within the cities or municipalities where they are physically located and, by extension, within their respective regions, given their reach, which extends well beyond their host communities.

In recent years, several Friendship Centres have established health clinics within their facilities in order to respond more effectively to the needs and requests of their members. Staff regularly seek to make up for gaps in Quebec's healthcare system and to navigate obstacles that leave Indigenous individuals and families facing serious challenges without adequate responses or care. While progress is emerging, the work ahead necessarily unfolds over the long term.

THE REGROUPEMENT DES CENTRES D'AMITIÉ AUTOCHTONES DU QUÉBEC (RCAAQ)

As the umbrella organization for affiliated Friendship Centres and service points, the RCAAQ was established in 1976, following the creation of the national Canadian association in 1972. Like the Friendship Centres themselves, which have experienced significant growth over the past two decades, the RCAAQ has also expanded considerably and extended its reach. In particular, it has developed close collaborations with numerous government bodies at both the provincial and municipal levels, with the aim of aligning its actions with existing public policies while maintaining a vigilant stance to ensure that the initiatives, interests, needs and aspirations of Indigenous populations are taken into account and translated into concrete action. In doing so, it seeks to reconcile governmental management with Indigenous social and cultural objectives, with a view to consolidating its model of Indigenous community governance.

This vigilance is also reflected in the RCAAQ's active participation in government coordination and service-planning tables. It is sustained in the public sphere through ongoing, informed and purpose-driven public advocacy, and it is strengthened through research initiatives grounded in the co-production and mobilization of knowledge, as well as in the integration of scientific and Indigenous knowledge systems.

The RCAAQ supports each Native Friendship Centre and service point in their daily operations and interactions with local partners. Friendship Centres nonetheless maintain



full autonomy of action, reflecting their distinct local realities, in how they carry out their shared commitment to the Movement's mission. Today, several hundred individuals with diverse and complementary skills, most of whom are Indigenous, contribute to the work and future of the RCAAQ and the Native Friendship Centres.

THE SOCIÉTÉ IMMOBILIÈRE DU REGROUPEMENT DES CENTRES D'AMITIÉ AUTOCHTONES DU QUÉBEC (SIRCAAQ)

Continuing its commitment to the wellness of urban Indigenous populations, the RCAAQ created, in 2019, the Société immobilière du Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (SIRCAAQ). This distinct non-profit entity is dedicated to the design, development and management of Indigenous real estate projects. Its primary objective is to ensure that the skills and expertise developed in urban Indigenous contexts are applied to meet the specific needs of Indigenous populations, particularly in the area of housing.

Background

This position paper is submitted in response to the targeted call for position papers issued by Quebec's Ministère de la Sécurité publique (MSP), aimed at supporting reflection on the renewal of the government action plan for the prevention of and fight against sexual exploitation. It responds to the invitation extended to recognized entities to share their observations, analyses and recommendations on this issue, regardless of the age of the victims.

Sexual exploitation of Indigenous people in urban settings remains a persistent reality, often invisible and difficult to grasp. This position paper seeks to highlight the dynamics specific to this context, by exploring these topics:

- Trajectories of mobility and circular movement: Some Indigenous people move regularly between cities and communities, creating residential instability. This mobility, often linked to family, cultural or practical reasons, affects access to services and social anchoring in urban areas.
- Hidden forms of homelessness: Others experience precarious living situations that are less visible, such as staying with community members, which predominantly affects women (RCAAQ, 2025, publication forthcoming). These forms of homelessness, often unrecognized, increase the risks of sexual exploitation and complicate intervention.
- Recruitment strategies and relational control: Sexual exploitation can occur within dynamics of manipulation, emotional dependency or deceptive promises, making the violence difficult to recognize.
- Vulnerability factors: Isolation, poverty, broken family ties and unstable housing contribute to exposing some Indigenous people to situations of exploitation.

Objectives

This position paper aims to present the complexity of experiences lived by urban Indigenous people in a culturally relevant way and acknowledges the diversity of urban Indigenous pathways, including those who have never lived in a community. Its goal is to make often-overlooked realities visible in order to inform a fairer and better-adapted government response. In this



context, the position paper has these objectives:

- Document the forms of sexual exploitation experienced by urban Indigenous people, taking into account the diversity of experiences and contexts;
- Highlight specific vulnerability factors and relational dynamics that can facilitate exploitation, including links to street gangs, hidden homelessness and housing instability;
- Emphasize the complexity of the relationships between victims and exploiters, as well as the perceptions that influence recognition and reporting of exploitation;
- Explore regional issues and aggravating factors specific to urban settings, considering territorial realities and disparities in access to services;
- Propose culturally safe intervention approaches that are adapted to urban realities and are respectful of Indigenous knowledge.

A complex web: Indigenous sexual exploitation in urban contexts

The sexual exploitation of Indigenous people in urban settings cannot be understood without considering systemic vulnerabilities, disruptions to identity, and relational dynamics that are specific to this setting (Quebec Native Women, 2020). It occurs within an interwoven set of colonial, social and cultural factors that create a particularly high level of risk in certain life paths (Louie, 2018).

Preliminary data from the *Overview of Indigenous People and Access to Services in Urban Areas* (RCAAQ, forthcoming) indicate that 18.3% of the 2,003 Indigenous respondents reported having experienced sexual violence. Among these respondents, women were disproportionately affected (76.6%); a majority reported also having experienced family or intimate partner violence (71.9%); and others reported issues with alcohol or drug addiction (62.9%). These figures illustrate both the depth of the violence experienced and its interconnection with survival mechanisms and contexts of marginalization.

Understanding the issue is further complicated by language and terminology challenges (RCAAQ, 2025). In many Indigenous languages, there is no direct translation for the term “sexual exploitation.” Because these languages are often relational, metaphorical and deeply tied to the land, experiences of abuse, control or non-consensual transactions are expressed through stories, metaphors or symbols. This lack of specific vocabulary contributes to misunderstandings of the issue among both youth and adults and to the normalization of violence as a survival strategy.

It is essential to recognize that Indigenous people living in urban contexts do not form a homogeneous group. Some are in situations of migration or estrangement from their home communities, while others have always lived in the city, sometimes across multiple generations. This diversity of life paths influences relationships with culture, services, support networks and power dynamics. While young people are often more vulnerable to certain forms of exploitation, the issue affects people of all ages, and interventions must take this into account.

This complex web is the starting point from which the following sections examine the primary vulnerability contexts and exploitation dynamics specific to urban environments.



Vulnerability contexts in urban settings

Indigenous people living in urban environments are exposed to a range of vulnerabilities stemming from systemic, historical and social factors. Isolation, loss of cultural anchors, distrust of institutions and underutilization of social services are common realities, often exacerbated by intergenerational trauma, family breakdowns and discrimination in accessing housing and employment.

Youth coming out of institutional care, particularly through the Director of Youth Protection (DYP), face critical transitions upon reaching adulthood, often without a social safety net or guidance (RCAAQ, 2025). This transition exposes them to high-risk environments, where being sexually exploited may be viewed as a survival strategy. However, these vulnerabilities are not limited to youth: Indigenous adults experiencing precarity or social disconnection are also at risk.

Recruitment strategies and relational control

Recruiters—whether they are from street gangs, organized networks or even close contacts—exploit systemic gaps and the emotional or material needs of vulnerable individuals (RCAAQ, 2025). Recruitment can involve drugs, promises of a better life or the provision of basic necessities. Gestures that appear caring (gifts, listening, validation) are used to build trust, particularly with youth who are running away, experiencing family instability or facing isolation.

A frequently underestimated risk factor is the normalization of sexual violence experienced during childhood or adolescence (Quebec Native Women, 2020). When these abuses are minimized within family, community or institutional settings, they can distort perceptions of what constitutes a healthy or safe relationship. This confusion facilitates relational control, where compliance with exploitation is rationalized as a means of survival or validation.

Social media also plays a role in recruitment as it enables recruiters to approach young people discretely and to weave emotional bonds (Quebec Native Women, 2020). Recruiters may be friends, partners or family members, making reporting even more difficult and affecting not only the individual but the broader community.

Hidden homelessness and housing precarity

Hidden homelessness is a pervasive reality among urban Indigenous populations. It often involves temporary stays with acquaintances, sometimes in exchange for services, including sexual services. This form of homelessness is difficult to document and increases the risks of abuse and exploitation for Indigenous women (Comat et al., 2019), including sexual predation and involvement in prostitutions (FNQLHSSC, 2016; Granger, 2024; Lévesque & Comat, 2018a, 2018b; RCAAQ, 2024a). These risks are further compounded by systemic discrimination, unresolved trauma and mental health challenges.

Lack of stable housing represents a major risk factor for sexual exploitation (RCAAQ, 2025). Youth in transitional or family-breakdown situations are especially vulnerable, but adults without secure housing are equally at risk. The absence of stable anchors, institutional support and official recognition of hidden homelessness contributes to the normalization of exploitation in these contexts.

Complexity of relationships and victim perceptions

Sexual exploitation does not always take a coercive form. It can be masked by emotional dynamics, where recruiters position themselves as charismatic or caring figures, offering affection, attention or validation. Material benefits—food, transportation, clothing, drugs or promises of love—create a dependency that is difficult to break.



Due to their continually negotiated social status, Indigenous women experience rates of intimate partner violence, physical assault and homicide more than four times higher than non-Indigenous women in Canada (Brownridge, 2008). Despite this stark overrepresentation, their reality remains largely invisible in the media, reflecting a persistent devaluation of Indigenous women in the public sphere (Gilchrist, 2010).

Some victims become recruiters themselves in an attempt to maintain their position within the network or to gain credibility. These complex relational dynamics blur boundaries and make it difficult to recognize exploitation, particularly when exploiters are friends or family members.

Regional issues and aggravating factors

In certain urban regions, specific socioeconomic contexts exacerbate the risks of sexual exploitation. For example, the extractive industries located in Côte-Nord and in Abitibi attract a temporary, often male workforce, creating increased demand for sexual services (Quebec Native Women, 2020). Indigenous women and youth living in precarious conditions are especially at risk in these areas, where existing vulnerabilities are intensified by economic pressures and the lack of adequate resources.

A tailored intervention approach

Given the complexity of the life paths and circumstances of Indigenous people in urban settings, it is essential to develop a tailored intervention approach grounded in Indigenous knowledge, lived realities and the principles of cultural safety. This approach must be flexible, relational and focused on creating informal connections and authentic closeness with the individuals concerned. It is within these relational spaces, often outside formal structures, that the trust necessary for meaningful support is built.

Culturally safe and accessible approach

Native Friendship Centres play a frontline role in supporting Indigenous people who are victims of sexual exploitation. Their holistic approach takes into account intersectional realities, intergenerational trauma and the historical context specific to Indigenous communities. They provide safe, respectful and non-judgemental spaces where people can be welcomed and supported along their journey.

Here are few notable initiatives:

- Formal 24/7 emergency lines established at the Centre d'amitié autochtone de Lanaudière (CAAL) and Centre d'amitié autochtone Capetciwotakanik (CAAC) in La Tuque, allowing for rapid and context-sensitive crisis response;
- Health and wellness clinics where professionals provide care in culturally safe environments;¹

List of the eight Indigenous health and wellness clinics:

- Indigenous health clinic in the Val-d'Or Indigenous Friendship Centre
- Indigenous health clinic in the Centre d'amitié autochtone Capetciwotakanik (La Tuque)
- Wellness centre in the Maniwaki Native Friendship Centre
- Mirerimowin Clinic and Mikinakw mobile clinic of the Centre d'amitié autochtone de Lanaudière (CAAL)
- Uatik'u Indigenous health clinic of the Centre multi-services MAMUK
- Nitnat Chez-nous clinic of the Centre d'amitié autochtone de Québec
- Indigenous health clinic at the Centre d'amitié autochtone de Trois-Rivières

- Legal clinics providing local access to adapted and culturally safe services, designed to respond effectively to the varied and sometimes complex needs of urban Indigenous people; these also serve as an entry point to inform and support individuals who are victims of, or at risk of, sexual exploitation;
- Kicteritcikewin – Respect project at the Centre d'amitié autochtone Capetciwotakanik (CAAC) in La Tuque, offering targeted support for youth newly arrived in the city, including sharing circles, workshops on consent, healthy communication, addictions and a mentorship program;
- Ninawi Group at the Val-d'Or Indigenous Friendship Centre (VDIFC), supporting Indigenous Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ people through spaces for dialogue, identity pride and resilience.

These initiatives demonstrate a commitment to building a shared vision, strengthening community capacities and creating support pathways adapted to urban Indigenous realities. To support culturally grounded healing, approaches must draw on Indigenous knowledge, honour traditional wellness practices and recognize the role of Elders, talking circles and community spaces. Healing cannot be linear or imposed; it must be guided by those directly affected, and respect their pace, choices and identity. These approaches also emerge in response to widespread mistrust of public institutions, which are often seen as unsuitable or inaccessible. The next section explores the roots of this mistrust and its impact on intervention pathways.

Critical findings: Mistrust and systemic barriers

Despite promising initiatives and culturally safe approaches developed within urban Indigenous communities, several structural realities continue to hinder the implementation of fully adapted interventions. This section presents the main critical findings observed on the ground, shedding light on the persistent mistrust of public institutions and the systemic and operational barriers that shape urban Indigenous people's life trajectories.

Institutional mistrust and systemic overrepresentation

Urban Indigenous people, particularly those who have experienced sexual exploitation, often express deep mistrust toward public institutions. This mistrust is reinforced by experiences of systemic racism, disproportionate involvement in the judicial system, lack of recognition of Indigenous realities and the absence of services tailored to their cultural and social needs.

According to the RCAAQ's *Indigenous People Facing Justice and Public Security: Overview of Urban Issues in Quebec*, the number of First Nations members involved with the justice system is five to six times higher than for non-Indigenous people, while Inuit experience the highest provincial incarceration rate, including the largest proportion of incarcerated women and the longest sentences. These data illustrate systemic overrepresentation that, far from being neutral, influences life paths and perceptions of institutions (RCAAQ, 2024b).

Indigenous judicialization is often intertwined with challenges such as mental health issues, homelessness, poverty and substance use. When these realities are not acknowledged or understood in their full complexity, they reinforce barriers to service access, render victims invisible and perpetuate cycles of violence (RCAAQ, 2024b).



In response to these realities, it is essential to recognize urban Indigenous expertise, transform institutional practices and build bridges of trust through locally grounded approaches, safe spaces and initiatives developed in collaboration with urban Indigenous people.

Operational barriers and intervention challenges

Despite sustained efforts from urban Indigenous communities, several structural and operational barriers continue to hinder the implementation of interventions fully adapted to the realities of Indigenous people living in cities:

- Service deserts: Certain urban areas lack resources to meet Indigenous needs.
- Fragmented and poorly adapted service pathways: Services are often designed without consultation with Indigenous people and fail to appropriately address lived realities.
- Prejudice and difficult social coexistence: Negative stereotypes and experiences of discrimination reinforce mistrust of institutions.
- Lack of specific data: The absence of disaggregated data on urban Indigenous populations complicates the development of targeted responses.
- Housing access: Prejudice and landlord racism limit access to safe and culturally appropriate housing.
- Infrastructure and safety challenges: Native Friendship Centres serve highly diverse populations: people experiencing homelessness, youth, families, Elders, individuals with mental health or substance use challenges, and victims or people at risk of sexual exploitation. The cohabitation of these groups in often limited spaces can generate tensions, conflicts and a sense of insecurity for some, while presenting significant challenges for staff, particularly in terms of safety and managing multiple, very different needs simultaneously.

These challenges call for collective action, recognition of Indigenous expertise and transformation of institutional practices to better meet the needs of Indigenous people living in urban contexts.

Recommendations for coordinated action

The findings presented in this position paper call for a structured, coordinated response grounded in Indigenous knowledge. The proposed courses of action aim to equip communities, strengthen intervention capacities and create conditions conducive to lasting transformation. They are framed around the necessity of collaborating with Indigenous people and organizations, in a spirit of community mobilization, intersectoral cooperation and recognition of urban Indigenous realities as the foundation for a relevant and respectful response.

1. **Document sexual exploitation among urban Indigenous populations.** This requires rigorous data collection, the integration of life stories and a commitment to co-developing intervention strategies based on a nuanced understanding of the field. It should also identify the specificities of Indigenous realities, distinct from non-Indigenous contexts, to design truly relevant responses. Efforts should build on recommendations from national inquiries, notably the Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NIMMIWG), in collaboration with communities, while also



elevating the voices of those affected as a lever for transforming practices.

2. **Support and strengthen Indigenous Friendship Centres and the urban living environments of the Société immobilière du RCAAQ (SIRCAAQ) as safe urban spaces. This includes funding frontline services and recognizing these spaces as essential anchors for Indigenous people.** Financial support should enable the development of tailored services that encompass effective prevention, intervention and collaboration with victims, individuals involved in exploitation and their families, with a view to harm reduction and social transformation. It should also include concrete measures to facilitate access to safe, stable and culturally appropriate housing, which is recognized as a central determinant of health and wellness. In regions where industrial activities bring in a temporary or resident workforce, security strategies must be implemented. These include collaborating with economic actors, implementing community-based prevention mechanisms and developing intervention protocols adapted to local realities.
3. **Define an intervention approach that is tailored to the realities of urban Indigenous people and that considers relational dynamics, issues of mistrust toward services and multiple, intersecting contexts of vulnerability.** This approach must be flexible, inclusive and culturally safe, and grounded in the establishment of trust-based relationships and respect for individuals' life journeys. It must also recognize non-linear pathways, mobility and the specific needs of Two-Spirit and Indigenous LGBTQIA+ individuals. Particular attention should be paid to service continuity throughout life paths, by ensuring interservice coordination to prevent gaps in support.
4. **Strengthen intersectoral collaboration among key actors (youth protection services, public safety, community partners, educational institutions, local accessibility tables, etc.) in order to foster a coherent, coordinated response that is respectful of Indigenous realities.** This collaboration must be grounded in co-construction, recognition of Indigenous expertise and a genuine commitment to transforming institutional practices.
5. **Implement community-based education and awareness initiatives to shed light on the taboos surrounding sexual exploitation, improve access to services and support individuals in their healing journeys without judgment.** This includes education on healthy relationships, consent, self-esteem and the safe use of social media, drawing on visual and narrative tools and Indigenous languages. To reduce the risks of sexual exploitation, it is essential to raise awareness of the realities experienced by Indigenous people by deconstructing stereotypes, valuing Indigenous identities and creating spaces for intercultural dialogue. These efforts must target both Indigenous and non-Indigenous settings, including institutions, schools and businesses.



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