

2019 Indigenous Youth Focus Groups for Trust and Confidence

The 2018 Citizen Satisfaction Survey (CSS) results showed that Indigenous youth (ages 35 and under) represented a group with the least amount of confidence and trust in the Thunder Bay Police Service (TBPS). In her final CSS report, Desmoulins (2019) recommended further consultations with Aboriginal and other racialized youth to enhance survey data and give TBPS deeper perspectives from youth. The TBPS Senior Management approved focus group sessions to discuss how TBPS can build trust and confidence with Indigenous and racialized youth of Thunder Bay.

TBPS consultant Leisa Desmoulins and her team of researchers from Lakehead University conducted three focus group sessions with racialized youth in Thunder Bay. The purpose was to determine how TBPS can build trust and confidence with youth—specifically with Indigenous youth in Thunder Bay.

Methods

Three focus groups took place between April 17 – April 25, 2019 in Thunder Bay. Researchers recruited participants via presentations at youth organizations and connecting with organizations that work with youth. Nineteen youth aged 18 and 30 years participated. All youth self-identified as Aboriginal, except for two. Participants responded to four questions:

1. When you have contact with police (e.g. calling 911, going to police station, charged by an officer; RIDE program; stopped for a traffic violation, other), describe how an officer could treat you with respect. What would that look like?

2. Please describe ways that the TBPS could show more sensitivity to the needs of your group (i.e. the group you identify with through your ethnicity, race, culture, sexual orientation, religion/spirituality). What would that look like?
3. Building on question 2, what would the TBPS' greater sensitivity look like beyond your group, that is, for the whole city of Thunder Bay?
4. What could the TBPS do, that they aren't doing now, to gain more confidence from you? Describe what that might look like.

Data from the three focus group sessions were video recorded and transcribed. Three researchers independently developed codes from the transcripts. Then they met to establish intercoder agreement for codes [1]. From there researchers grouped these codes into recommendations. The next two sections show youths' recommendations divided into short term and long-term actions. The report ends with broad actions for TBPS to implement youth recommendations.

TBPS Actions/Recommendations from Youth

To clarify, short-term actions are steps the TBPS can take with minimal costs and training, and can be implemented immediately. Long-term actions are steps the TBPS can take that require resources, time, and training to implement. Each are described below.

Short-term Actions

These short-term recommendations work to **strengthen relationships through community engagement**. Youth suggest:

- Host events open to public to build relationships
- Attend special events to show support
- Learn from Indigenous communities at events

- Use social media to highlight the positive work of TBPS in the community.

The recommendations below characterize **respectful interactions**. Youth said:

- Exhibit patience with each call
- Initiate friendly conversations while on patrol
- Inform citizens of their rights at the beginning of all interactions
- Be aware of body language, eye level, and tone of voice.

The recommendations below stem from youths' beliefs that police hold biases against them because of their race. To achieve **bias-free policing**, youth said:

- Treat everyone equally regardless of their ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status
- Allow individuals to tell their full version of events
- Listen intently before responding
- Avoid prejudgements and have an open mind during encounters.

These short-term recommendations mostly focus on relationships between TBPS officers and youth. They are low-cost and relatively easy to implement. However, relationships may require further training and effort to strengthen engagement with community.

Long-term Actions

These long-term recommendations will take more time and work to **strengthen engagement with community**. Youth said:

- Develop an alternate uniform to wear at community events
- Partner with a broader range of Indigenous groups to reach more Indigenous community members

- Develop a system to be up to date on community events to attend
- Partake in events specific to youth (i.e. play sports; build skills; share food, etc.).

These long-term recommendations will take more effort and **focus on structural changes** within TBPS. Youth recommend:

- Build diversity in the TBPS workforce
- Focus on protecting vulnerable citizens. Suggestions include: community building for crime prevention, fostering positivity, and safety for all members in the city
- Designate a hate crime liaison from community (whose contact is not 911)
- Employ Indigenous community engagement liaison officers and staff.

These long-term recommendations will take more time and effort to **establish accountability to community**. Youth said:

- Improve communications with community through multiple channels
- Communicate with public about actions taken regarding report and inquiry recommendations
- Use body cams on officers
- Implement harsher repercussions for police who abuse their authority

These long-term recommendations will take more time and work to **build understanding through education and training**. Youth suggest:

- Police need to be educated on Indigenous history in northwestern Ontario
- Learn about the local historical relationships between Indigenous peoples and police
- Partake in training on implicit biases in policing
- Educate new police officers on the socio-economic issues within Thunder Bay.

Thus, the youth have provided a range of recommendations to improve trust and confidence in policing. Indeed, one youth stated, “We don’t trust the police and they don’t trust us”. Many of the youths seek to renew relationships with police based in trust and confidence.

Trust between youth and TBPS will continue to decline if “problems are talked and talked about ... but little action is taken” [2]. Notably, some recommendations have been made previously. Youth recommendations for actions include the use of body and car mounted cameras [3], collection of police/citizen contact statistics [4], and ongoing feedback from the community [5] to establish accountability and relationships between youth and TBPS. To actualize youths’ recommendations, researchers provide steps for TBPS to move forward on youths’ recommendations.

Moving Forward

For the TBPS to implement the youth recommendations above, we recommend the following:

1. Make youth engagement a TBPS-wide priority, beyond the existing Youth Corps. The Aboriginal Liaison Unit already works to build relationships with youth. There is potential to expand and partner with youth (e.g. youth group at the city of Thunder Bay, the Regional Multicultural Youth Council, Nishnawbe Aski Nation’s Oshkaatisak (All Young People’s) Council, Northern Nishnawbe Education Council, Matawa First Nations, and Indigenous centres at Confederation College and Lakehead University).
2. Participate with Indigenous and racialized youth groups listed above at ongoing events like sports programs, Mino Bimaadiziwin youth leadership camp, and Gay Pride parade and festivities. Additional events could include attending and hosting feasts and

celebrations, and participating in/organizing sporting events or art activities for youth. TBPS needs to initiate and host events for and with youth.

3. Create an alternative uniform for TBPS officers, for example a golf shirt with logo, to wear for events with youth in the community. The youth asserted that an alternative uniform may help them feel more comfortable interacting with TBPS officers.

4. When officers have traffic duty, extend their shifts for the express purpose of engaging with youth. Again, the youth asked for this change to build trust and confidence. These recommendations are intended to improve relationships between TBPS and youth.

References

[1] Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

[2] McCaskill, D., Fitzmaurice, K., & Desmoulins, L. (2007). *The Urban Aboriginal Task Force: Thunder Bay Report* (p. 117). Retrieved from <http://ofifc.org/publication/urban-aboriginal-task-force-ontario-final-report>

[3] Spenser, K., Charbonneau, A., and Glaser, J. (2016). Implicit bias in policing. *Social and personality psychology compass*, 10(1), 50-63.

[4] Closs, W. & McKenna, P. (2006). Profiling a problem in Canadian police leadership. The Kingston Police data collection project. *Canadian Public Administration*, 49(2), 141-160.

[5] Winkler Institute for Dispute Resolution (WIDR). (2018). *Aboriginal youth: Designing a better justice system*. Retrieved from <https://winklerinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Designing-a-Better-Justice-System.pdf>