



# WellSpring

Sharing physical activity knowledge



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## “Sport is community”

### Urban Indigenous peoples’ meanings of community within sport

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Within the Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, residential school survivors shared stories of how sport at residential schools made their lives more bearable and how sport promoted a sense of identity, accomplishment and pride.<sup>1</sup> The various benefits of sport participation described by residential school survivors are consistent with the positive rhetoric regarding current day sport participation. In fact, there is a growing body of literature that highlights the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual benefits of sport participation for Indigenous youth.<sup>2,3</sup> Researchers have suggested that sport has ‘healing potential’ and can serve as ‘powerful medicine’ that can contribute to the various dimensions of holistic health for Indigenous youth.<sup>3,4</sup>

Despite the potential benefits of sport participation, research has also documented various barriers that limit the participation of Indigenous youth, including financial and time constraints. As well, Indigenous youth have described how they are “treated a little bit different” when participating in sports in urban centres.<sup>5</sup>

It is well established that for sport programs to be successful, they need to be community-driven and community-based.<sup>6-8</sup> However, within an urban setting, what does *community* mean for Indigenous youth and adults?

Such understandings of community are necessary in order to enhance sport opportunities for Indigenous youth in Alberta, as well as to provide them with relevant community-based sport programs. Guided by the integrated Indigenous-ecological model,<sup>4</sup> face-to-face interviews were conducted with Edmonton-based Indigenous youth and adults, to examine the meaning of community within the context of sport.

#### S U M M A R Y

Sport and community are often interconnected, yet little is understood about community within the context of sport for Indigenous youth. Understanding community is important to be able to enhance sport opportunities for Indigenous youth.

A study was undertaken with Edmonton-based Indigenous youth and adults to examine the meaning of community within the context of sport.

Key findings and implications for practice are provided.



## Key Findings

Five key themes emerged from the interviews, whereby community was described as: i) belonging, ii) supportive interactions, iii) family and friends, iv) sport, and v) where you live and come from. A summary of findings with illustrative quotes are highlighted below. Further details can be found in the study published by McHugh and colleagues.<sup>5</sup>

### Belonging

“Belonging” was a common word used by participants who explained how a feeling or sense of “belonging” is a key component of community. They described how a sense of belonging facilitates opportunities to engage or communicate with others in meaningful ways. The feeling of belonging emulates feelings of “home”.

### Supportive Interactions

Participants described how communities are comprised of people that are supportive of one another. One participant described community as, “People coming together and being happy, and communicating with each other, talking and not having arguments.” The interaction or communication that takes place among people in communities is central to their definitions of community.

The youth were very clear that the interactions which take place within communities are respectful and positive.

“Support” and “pride” were also terms that were used by most of the adult participants when describing their meanings of community.

### Family and Friends

Family and friends were considered central to participants’ definitions of community. Community is comprised of familiar faces and people they feel comfortable being around. It is a feeling of being safe, secure and at ease with people you know.

School was also described as an important community for urban Indigenous youth because it is comprised of friends and people that feel like family. The inclusiveness that can be promoted in schools also can support convenient sport opportunities.

### Sport

Sport itself was described as a community. As described by one youth, “Sport is community. On a team, you have to communicate with each other and be like a family. You have to balance everyone out just for them to be happy and successful.”

*The Indigenous-ecological model is unique in comparison to other social-ecological models in that it has been described specifically for sport, recreation and physical activity promotion in Indigenous communities.<sup>4</sup>*

From the adult perspective, sport provided youth an opportunity to join a team or play a sport, which subsequently fosters the sense of belonging and interaction that is central to community. Participation in sport not only provides youth opportunities to connect with others, but it also creates a sense of community by bringing families and communities together and making people feel proud.

### Where You Live and Come From

Finally, participants' meanings of community were described as where they live (e.g., urban neighbourhood) and where they come from (e.g., reserve community). For example, some participants explained how they are part of their "home" or "reserve" communities, and some participants described community as people they "grew up with".

The identification of multiple, intersecting community contexts highlights the challenge that is faced by those who seek to develop community-defined and community-driven sport opportunities with urban Indigenous youth.



*"On a team,  
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each other and be  
like a family."  
— Indigenous youth*

### Implications for Practice

The success and sustainability of sports programs can be enhanced when they originate and are guided by community needs and wants.<sup>9</sup> This means including important community members (e.g., parents, extended family, coaches) and organizations (e.g., schools, neighbourhood leagues), as they play critical roles in the activity of youth (e.g., providing transportation and financial aid, guiding youth into programming).<sup>6</sup>

As found in this study, there may be a number of different communities that can be explored and understood, such as school community or neighbourhoods, which could guide the development of relevant sport programs for urban Indigenous youth.

Since the youth in this study described a sense of belonging that is fostered within their urban school, the concept of "school is community" may be important when looking to develop sport programs and initiatives.

Irrespective of the setting, the sense of community through sport provides opportunities to address financial and social barriers, thus supporting Indigenous youth to achieve their sport goals.

## Conclusion

The knowledge gained through this study, provides insights into the meanings of community within the context of sport for Indigenous youth. These meanings can be utilized to develop sport programs that are community-driven and community-based. Most importantly, the knowledge shared by participants can be utilized to ensure that sport programs are relevant to Indigenous youth.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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