



ANNUAL REPORT 2019



SASKATCHEWAN
advocate
FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH



Letter of Transmittal

April 29, 2020

The Honourable Mark Docherty
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
Legislative Building
2405 Legislative Drive
Regina SK S4S 0B3

Dear Mr. Speaker:

In accordance with section 39 of *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act*, it is my duty and privilege to submit to you and members of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan this Annual Report from the Advocate for Children and Youth for the year 2019.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lisa Broda".

Lisa Broda, PhD
Advocate for Children and Youth

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Message from the Advocate



It is my honour to present our Annual Report for 2019 as the newly appointed Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth.

I accepted this appointment humbled by the collective work of my predecessors and want to acknowledge

the respect I have for their significant contributions in advocating for young people over the past 25 years. Their combined work has been critical in advancing substantive changes within the child serving systems and has demonstrated the importance of working collaboratively, while holding systems accountable. As I move forward in my tenure, it is clear there is still much work to do in bettering systems for children, families, and communities. Meaningful change is required if we all believe that the rights of children to be safe, protected, and supported to fully participate in our society is important. Listening to children and youth, placing them at the center of planning, and carrying their voice to the decision-makers who hold the future of these young people in their hands, is at the heart of this change.

Key aspects of our work this year have centered on amplifying youth voice and advocating for young people on the issue of mental health. In May of 2019, we held our youth-led mental health conference that provided a forum for some very brave young people to speak in front of an adult audience about mental health and addictions, the barriers they face, and what is needed to make it better. It was powerful to hear about their experiences and encouraging to see that many adult decision-makers at the conference were willing to listen and take their calls to action seriously. Alongside of this, we also continued our

work examining the landscape of mental health services for children in Saskatchewan—what is working and what is not—and will be issuing a report recommending improvements that will be released later this year.

My office also led a report on youth suicide on behalf of the Canadian Council for Child and Youth Advocates (Council) entitled, *A National Paper on Youth Suicide*, that was publicly released in September of 2019. This paper represents the collective work of the Council and the voice of young people that is meant to push change nationally. The rates of suicide among children and youth is unacceptable in this country, and the rates amongst Indigenous children as compared to non-Indigenous children is egregious. We must continue to work at influencing positive change through strategy, legislation and policy, and to support communities where young people are trying to lead this change. All children have the right to the best possible healthcare services that are sustainable, to ensure good mental health. Our office will continue to advocate provincially and nationally where appropriate, and with ministries, agencies, and communities for better health outcomes for children.

Since starting my tenure in November of 2019, I have been working closely with staff in renewing our strategic priorities that will set out our goals and actions for the next five years. Amplifying the perspectives and voice of young people is key to these priorities and is in accordance with their right to be heard under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* and to have a voice in all matters that affect them. Children and youth have much to offer in terms of their insights, knowledge, and experiences and we look forward to including their perspective in our work.

Embracing the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and ensuring 'reconciliation' is its own priority in our office is fundamental in addressing the disparity of Indigenous children who are grossly overrepresented in the child welfare system. The urgency in which change must occur for Indigenous children cannot be overstated. Influencing all sectors that serve children to embrace reconciliation for improved outcomes for Indigenous children will be part of this priority. We must continue to address the issues that plague Indigenous children who are calling on us to support them.

Collaborating to support Ministries, agencies, health entities, First Nations and Métis governments, and communities to work from a preventive framework is crucial to advancing change for the betterment of children. It is imperative to work preventively to get underneath the issues that impact families like poverty and addictions in order to better respond in keeping families and children together.

I look forward to working with our staff and executing our strategic direction over the next five years. The rights of children must not be cast aside. It is of vital importance that we prioritize young people and hold them up as leaders. This means we need to invest resources, time, and attention to ensure that they can live to their full potential, as is their right.

It is a privilege to hold this position and an honour to work on behalf of Saskatchewan's youngest citizens. I am strongly committed to advancing the rights of children in this province and particularly for Indigenous children who experience the most vulnerability, and to work toward substantive change for all. I am also looking forward to doing this work with the highly competent staff of this office who I offer a heartfelt thank you for their deeply committed efforts in serving children, and who work tirelessly and passionately on behalf of the young people in this province.

Respectfully submitted,

Lisa Broda, PhD
Saskatchewan Advocate
for Children and Youth

The Foundation of the Advocate's Work

The Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent officer of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan.

Our mandate is defined by *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act*. We do:

- **ADVOCACY** on behalf of children and youth receiving services from a provincial ministry, direct or delegated agency, or publicly-funded health entity
- **INVESTIGATIONS** into any matter concerning, or services provided to, children and youth by a provincial ministry, direct or delegated agency, or publicly-funded health entity
- **PUBLIC EDUCATION** to raise awareness of the rights, interests, and well-being of children and youth
- **RESEARCH AND ADVISE** on any matter relating to the rights, interests, and well-being of children and youth

These functions are all interconnected and support the overarching goal to create systemic change for the benefit of the young people in Saskatchewan.



A Foundation of Rights

Our work is guided by the following principles:

UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (UNCRC)

All people have human rights. Children and youth require special protections because many decisions are made on their behalf by adults. In 1991, Canada ratified the UNCRC, a legally-binding international instrument that guarantees these special protections.

The UNCRC has 54 articles protecting children's rights by setting standards in health care, education, and legal, civil and social services. The four core principles of the UNCRC are:

- Non-discrimination
- Best interests of the child
- Right to life, survival, and development
- Respect for the views of the child

UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (UNDRIP)

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is guided by the purpose and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, which recognizes and affirms Indigenous people's inherent rights. The UNDRIP references 46 articles that speak about rights to:

- Land
- Culture and language
- Self-determination
- Non-discriminatory or oppressive practices
- Protection of elders, women, and children
- Right to survive and develop
- Liberty and freedom
- Participate in any decision that affects Indigenous people

Article 21 and 22 specifically reference that attention shall be paid to the continuing improvement of the social and economic conditions as pertains to the special needs of elders, women, youth, and children. It also references that the 'State', in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take measures to ensure Indigenous women and children are afforded special protections.



SASKATCHEWAN CHILDREN AND YOUTH FIRST PRINCIPLES

Our office distilled the 54 articles of the UNCRC into those most applicable to Saskatchewan. These principles were adopted by the provincial government in 2009 and include the following:

- Those rights defined by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*
- Participate and be heard before any decision affecting them is made
- Have their best interests given paramount consideration in any action or decision involving them
- An equal standard of care, protection, and services
- The highest standard of health and education possible to reach their fullest potential
- Safety and protection from all forms of physical, emotional, and sexual harm while in the care of parents, governments, legal guardians, or any person
- Be treated as the primary client, and at the centre of all child-serving systems
- Have consideration given to the importance of their unique life history and spiritual traditions and practices, in accordance with their stated views and preferences



TOUCHSTONES OF HOPE FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES

The *Touchstones of Hope*, as created by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, are a guide to reconciliation in a variety of sectors in which children are served. The *Touchstones of Hope* promote relating, restoring, truth telling, and acknowledging.

The process is based on five principles:

- Self-determination
- Respect for culture and language
- Importance of structural intervention
- Non-discrimination
- Holistic approach



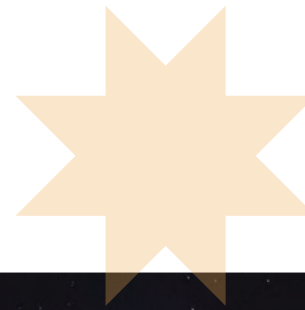
Engagement to

EDUCATE

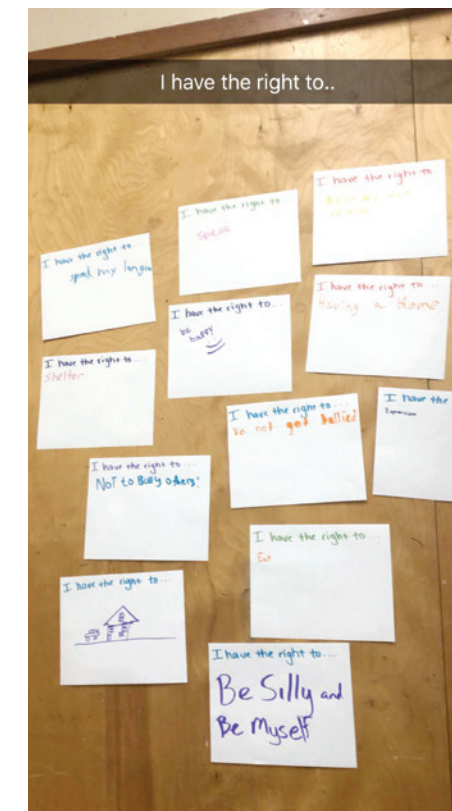
Connecting with young people, communities, and agencies to educate about who we are and how our office can advocate for young people is part of our core business. Failing to uphold the rights of children and youth is the second largest group of issues reported to our office. Our engagement efforts not only help the young people to know their rights, but also informs the adults in their lives.

Building relationships and increasing awareness of children and youth rights and issues results in better services for our province's young people.

The images reflected here are some of the places we visited and programs we provided in 2019 in order to promote rights and educate the public about the services our office provides.



Saskatchewan First Nations Child Welfare Conference, January 2019



Buffalo Narrows Youth Conference, February 2019



Photo courtesy of
Pinehouse Photography Club



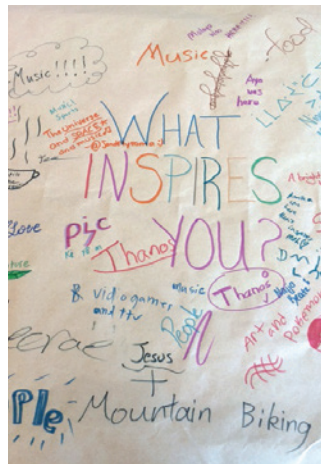
Meadow Lake Tribal Council Child & Family Services Land Camp, February 2019



Treaty 4 Education Alliance Youth Symposium, May 2019



Inspire YXE Youth Conference, April 2019



Pencils of Hope School Supplies Delivery, August 2019



United Way & Big Brothers, Big Sisters Day of Caring, June 2019



Mental Health 30 Online Curriculum Launch Sunwest DLC, October 2019

Young People Can Lead the Way to CHANGE

Year over year, our office continues to hear of experiences where children and youth persistently struggle or experience significant difficulties with issues such as violence, abuse, neglect, trauma, poverty, lack of service provisions, and not feeling heard; all of which leads to young people falling through the cracks.

These issues are not new — the work of the Advocate's office since its inception has been to work on behalf of young people to address the issues that plague their lives. It is clear when taking inventory of our efforts over the past year that working collaboratively with children and youth is the answer to making the necessary changes required for improving outcomes in their lives. This was evidenced in our support and collaboration with the youth on our advisory committee in their planning of the ACY Youth Led Conference on mental health that occurred in May 2019.

Our engagement with young people reminds us it is crucially important that youth be present when adults make decisions about them, not only about their mental health and wellness, but in all aspects of their lives. When we include young people's input into the systems that control their destiny, we see how this inclusion allows a window into the difficulties they experience and inspires ways in which we can work systemically to support them. Through this, we can gain knowledge, understanding, insight, and wisdom to help them grow to their full potential.



Photo courtesy of
Pinehouse Photography Club

YOUTH VOICE CRITICAL FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION SERVICES

A major endeavor undertaken by our office this past year was hosting a youth-led, staff supported, conference on the topic of mental health. The conference entitled, *Back Now in My Day: Our Issues, Our Voice, Our Time*, was held in Saskatoon on May 9–10, 2019, coinciding with the Canadian Mental Health Associations 68th Annual Mental Health Week (mentalhealthweek.ca).

The intent and importance of this conference was grounded in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* referenced above. Children and youth have the right to the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination. This means having their mental health needs addressed to ensure their right to overall well-being is met, no matter who they are or where they live.

Unfortunately, while there are many strengths within the system, there are barriers that children and youth face in accessing mental health services. Geographical location, lack of resources, and unreasonable wait times can violate their rights, which results in a significant cost to the children and youth, their families, and our communities in Saskatchewan.

Amplifying the voice of young people regarding their mental wellness is key in informing service provision of their needs. It fulfills our commitment to support the perspectives of young people to have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them and the right to have their views taken seriously by those in decision-making positions.



The development of the conference's theme, content, format, and agenda was entirely led by a committee of youth with diverse experiences, cultures, and backgrounds, aged 13 to 21. Our office supported the youth planning committee with conceptualization and development throughout the planning phase.

Young people were presenters, panelists, and masters of ceremony. They chaired concurrent sessions, operated the registration table, and took video testimonials from conference attendees. Depending on the topic areas determined by the youth planning committee, other youth presenters were recruited from across the province.

The *Back Now in My Day* conference targeted adult participants such as community stakeholders and organizational leaders in the public and private sector. The conference was attended by over 250 people including senior administrators, government and Band officials, policymakers, philanthropists, private business representatives, and those who work directly with young people.

The youth planning committee chose the title *Back Now in My Day: Our Issues, Our Voice, Our Time* and designed the logo.

The title was chosen because, in the words of one of the youth:

"We've all heard the saying "Back in my day" from parents or adults in general. Whenever they recall that time, they had way bigger cellphones or had slower internet access that do that funny noise. The title of the conference: "Back Now In My Day: Our Issues, Our Voice, Our Time" means that times have changed, and along with that, the way us youth interact with the world. The reason why the "Back" is crossed out and replaced with "Now" is what the youth planning committee wants to emphasize in this conference. No matter which angle we look at it from, things have changed over time and we're both more connected and distant from one another."

The youth planning committee also brainstormed certain themes and topics they believed were essential for adults to know, and to help them understand why it's important for adults to listen to them. Many expressed that being a young person today is stressful enough, and when their mental health suffers, not being heard only makes matters worse.

The conference provided space for young people to take a leadership role in speaking to adult stakeholders and to provide perspective on their struggles with mental health to the adults listening. It was also meant to show that systems can positively or negatively impact their mental well-being and how these same systems can support meaningful improvements for change.

Youth presentations took a variety of forms, including keynote addresses, facilitated panels, group and individual presentations, poetry, and film. The youth spoke on a variety of current issues related to youth mental health, drawing from their own experiences with systems, adults, and their peers.

TOPICS INCLUDED:

- descriptions of lived experiences with the challenges and successes in dealing with mental health issues and the coping mechanisms used
- panel discussions of how engagement in meaningful activities can have positive impacts on youth well-being
- the dark realities of what youth experience on social media, and how positive engagement with social media can be part of the solution
- the unique experiences of youth in northern Saskatchewan
- how having hearing disabilities and the deprivation of language can impact youth mental health
- how society's systems (education, health, culture and sport, social services, and justice) can both hurt and help

"You're not actually healthy unless you're mentally and physically well at the same time."

– Youth Quote



"We shouldn't have to harm ourselves just to be taken seriously. It shouldn't have to come down to that."

– Youth Quote

The conference also included an evening event that was specific for parents and caregivers. The youth felt it was important to share the difficulties young people face, and how the actions of parents/caregivers can affect them — both positively and negatively. Its intent was to provide solutions that caregivers can use to help young people through their difficulties and help them to come out on the other side.

Table vendors were included as part of the conference planning and comprised of a combination of both youth-based businesses/initiatives and mental health resources for youth. Entertainment was provided during wellness breaks and lunch by renowned youth fiddle player, Jordan Daniels, and young musical artist, Rebecca Strong.

A vital outcome of this conference was giving young people a rare opportunity to inform the adult decision-makers (from caregivers to senior officials in government) what is required to improve systems that impact their mental health.



YOUTH CALLS TO ACTION:

- increasing access to Indigenous culture and ceremony
- providing long-term support through grief and loss
- paying attention to young people — simply asking if they are okay
- having anyone working closely with youth (i.e. coaches, teachers, etc.) be aware of signs of emotional struggle and substance abuse, as well as knowing when and how to reach out
- providing safe places for youth to talk
- creating access to youth support groups and peer support (for mental health and physical conditions)
- providing access to breakfast and lunch in schools
- providing access to physical activity, art, music, dance, and other programs to assist with self-expression, self-esteem, and to build skills
- creating a program to teach youth how to write grants to make their programming ideas come to life
- having adults model appropriate behaviour (i.e. related to language, showing respect, responsible use of devices and social media, building relationships with youth)
- increasing mental health education in schools (for students and teachers)
- providing education for youth on unhealthy thinking patterns and how to break them, as well as education on healthy coping strategies
- creating environments in schools where youth feel safety and belonging (i.e. address bullying, take students seriously when they come forward with a struggle or concern)
- improving the education system to meet the needs of hearing impaired and language deprived youth
- adequately training mental health professionals in American Sign Language to make services accessible
- providing more interaction and therapy for youth within in-patient psychiatric centres
- ensuring timely, accessible services to youth across the entire spectrum of mental health challenges (i.e. have options for youth other than sending them home or admitting them for significant suicidal behaviour)
- reduce wait lists for child/youth psychiatry
- provide mental health/social support/services to children/youth being treated for significant physical conditions
- creating opportunities for youth to hear from others who have had similar experiences about how they learned to cope and get through
- developing a detox centre for youth in northern Saskatchewan
- ensuring safe and appropriate out-of-home placements for children in care
- having the youth justice system recognize that youth behaviour within correctional facilities may be related to mental health struggles and respond appropriately
- including youth in mental health service planning for communities and the province

YOUTH RECOMMENDATION

"We need more programs. I wake up every day and go to school for my programs. If I don't have a program that day, I'm not going. I'll get the homework, I'll do it at home. I'll still get my work done. But if there's an activity I want to attend on a daily basis, or even occasionally, I'm going to school. It helps a lot. 'Cause, when you're surrounded by a bunch of people you don't want [to] be around and then by being by people you want to be around after school — even being with a teacher that you want to be around after school is amazing. Like, people know me for my sports, but I had to quit sports because of my feet. If it weren't for the business club, [...] I wouldn't be here."



The youth conference committee thought it was important to ask the participants to provide their feedback on the conference. Participants expressed great appreciation for the opportunity to hear about the issue of youth mental health directly from young people and remarked on the courage, honesty, insightfulness, and wisdom conveyed by the youth. An overwhelming majority of the conference participants stated they learned new information about youth mental health and, as a result, thought about youth mental health differently than they had prior to attending. Participants also indicated they would share the information learned at the conference with colleagues and their leadership, stating they would immediately take steps identified by the youth as being necessary. Examples include taking suicide awareness training, asking youth directly about their mental health, paying more attention to, and talking about, the risks to mental health associated with social media, implementing support groups for youth in their schools and communities, increasing awareness of mental health resources, and talking about mental health with the youth and parents they work with.

Conference participants expressed interest in having the conference expand to take place in other areas of the province, to be longer in duration, and to include additional presentations and more information on topics not covered.

Our office is extremely pleased with the response and applauds the intentions of those who attended to take up the calls to action made by these youth. It is the hope and expectation of our office that these calls to action, shared so courageously by young people through this conference, will be taken seriously, and that changes will be made at every level — within our homes, our communities, our services, and our governments — to fulfill their rights to health, safety, participation, and development to their fullest potential.

Above all else, the Advocate for Children and Youth office wishes to express a heartfelt thank you to all of these brave young people who stepped forward to share their voice, experiences, knowledge, art, and music with everyone who attended. It takes fortitude and resiliency to speak openly and demonstrates the strength of character to step in front of an audience who has your future in their hands.

The relationships and networks of support the youth built with each other, with our office, and with other stakeholders through this process is also important to acknowledge as having a positive impact on their mental well-being. As one youth told us,

"What's really important to me about this committee is the relationships that we all built together. We started off as not knowing each other, beginning to know each other's names, that was about it. Until now. Now we all know each other like we're brothers and sisters and that's how we treat each other. It's very important for me to be here because I don't really have much experience getting out there and being out there for conferences – [...] not for mental health. I've been struggling with mental health, so this is going to help me a lot."



These young people of Saskatchewan have continued their journey for change even after the conclusion of the conference, whether through formal initiatives, public speaking, the creation of art, or within their own personal interactions with others "by just being there". The strength, knowledge, and leadership they have shown is invaluable in making a difference for themselves and for other young people in Saskatchewan and beyond. We are grateful for the opportunity to get to know and learn from these incredible and inspiring young leaders who are helping to shape our future. We wish them all the best!

"It's important for me to be here, because adults don't always understand what us youth are saying about mental health and are just assuming things. So, it's nice to have a voice so that you guys can hear what we're trying to say."

– Youth Quote

MESSAGES FROM CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS TO YOUTH

"Thank you, thank you to all youth who were so brave, so professional, so empathetic and caring enough of others to share. Thank you for being leaders in driving home the mental health issues and needs of our youth today who operate in a whole new world as opposed to 15 years ago. Invaluable information and perspectives shared."

"Most impactful means of reaching those that can help."

"I'm really impressed and wished this existed when I was in high school. Thank you for being vulnerable and sharing your experiences and stories. If this could be expanded to Regina and other communities, as services vary from location to location, that'd be super beneficial."

"I hope that you will keep going – teaching about mental health and give families the help they need."

"Hearing the stories was meaningful to me as both a support in the community and a mom."

"Great job in organizing and presenting at the conference. Your voice will make a difference."

"Fantastic conference — vital to hear directly from those who are impacted by mental health issues."

COMING TOGETHER NATIONALLY TO ADDRESS SUICIDE

Another major endeavour of our office in 2019 was leading the national paper on youth suicide for The Canadian Council of Child & Youth Advocates (Council). The Council is an alliance of Advocates, Representatives, and Ombudsman with offices in ten provinces and two territories that hold explicit mandates to ensure that the rights of all children and youth in Canada are respected and upheld.

Over the past 10 years, every member of the Council has expressed concern publicly over the loss of young people to suicide and the inadequacies of youth mental health services to ensure their well-being. As suicide is the leading cause of death of children and youth in Canada¹, and with the rates disproportionately high among Indigenous children and youth, the Council

committed themselves to find an innovative way to shine a national spotlight on this critical issue.

A National Paper on Youth Suicide (2019) represents an examination of the extensive body of work undertaken by Council members between 2012–2018, including calls on the federal government to adopt some key actions to substantively address the drivers of youth suicide. At the National Biennial Conference held in Winnipeg, Manitoba from September 16–18, 2019, the Council publicly released the report with media attention garnered both nationally and at local levels.

Our office led and conducted the research leading to the systemic findings. The primary findings emerging from this review include: evidence of association between childhood or intergenerational trauma and suicidal behaviour often due to early involvement in child and family systems;

evidence that service providers operating in silos increases the risk of suicide, particularly for youth with complex mental health needs; and, evidence that youth engagement can enhance the potential for genuine solutions to combat youth suicide and improve the mental health system pertaining to youth.

As part of the methodology, young people across three provinces weighed in on these findings and their perspectives are woven throughout the report.

The Council made three Calls to Action directed to the federal government that focus on implementing a National Suicide Strategy, creating a cross-jurisdictional data system of suicide attempts and completed suicide, and to develop meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities with high rates of suicidal behaviour of their young people. Young Canadians, inclusive of all backgrounds, should be given concrete opportunities to participate and these should be built into the process of implementing the Calls to Action.

The Council was compelled to issue these Calls to Action to the federal government in the absence of a National Commissioner or body that provides independent oversight on critical systemic issues that children and youth in Canada overwhelmingly face, such as suicide. The Council intends to use *A National Paper on Youth Suicide* (2019) as a tool for strategic advocacy with federal, First Nation, Inuit and Métis governments, non-government national bodies, and community-based agencies who hold common goals and passion in working to achieve optimal health and well-being of children and youth in Canada.

¹ Mental Health Commission of Canada (2017). Suicide Prevention. Ottawa, ON: Retrieve from: <http://www.mental-healthcommission.ca/English/focus-areas/suicide-prevention>

***“We need to be heard.
It’s a struggle when we
are not heard. But once
we do, it’s a relief.”***

– Youth Quote

Photo courtesy of Pinehouse Photography Club

LIVED EXPERIENCE TO INFORM FUTURE INITIATIVES

In our 2018 Annual Report, we discussed our ongoing concern with mental health supports for children and youth in Saskatchewan schools and beyond. Our advocacy in this area contributed to piloting the Mental Health Capacity Building in Schools initiative in Saskatchewan. This initiative focuses on partnering and collaborations that provide staffing and support required to implement an integrated, school-based community mental health promotion, prevention, and early intervention program within school communities. Supported by provincial and federal funding and led by the Saskatchewan Health Authority, five Saskatchewan schools began piloting this initiative in 2019: Dr. Martin LeBoldus Catholic High School in Regina, Hector Thiboutot School in Sandy Bay, North Battleford Comprehensive High School, John Paul II Collegiate in North Battleford, and Greenall High School in Balgonie. We know from our contact with some staff involved in this pilot phase there is enthusiasm about its potential to improve community access to services for youth. We are hopeful the successes achieved in this pilot will be more broadly applied across Saskatchewan schools in the near future.

In its 2019–20 budget, the Government of Saskatchewan made record investments in mental health and addictions services. In addition to supporting the Mental Health Capacity Building, examples of other initiatives likely to improve service experiences of young people include the expansion of Mental Health walk-in clinics, PACT (police and crisis teams), increased Mental Health First Aid training, targeted physician training in child and youth mental health, and addictions awareness campaigns.

While these added resources are positive, our concerns about reasonable access to mental health and addictions services in Saskatchewan remain. We continue to hear from children, youth, their caregivers, and professionals that accessing the right services at the right time continues to be a significant challenge.

As referred to in our 2018 Annual Report, we highlighted our commitment to examining mental health and addictions services for children and youth in Saskatchewan using a research-focused approach. Our primary goal has been to learn from young people, parents and caregivers, health officials, service providers, community advocates, and other stakeholders about their understanding of, and lived experiences in, accessing or providing mental health and addiction services. We hope to identify what has been working well, however, also shed light on the ongoing disconnect between these real-life experiences and our current mental health and addictions system in Saskatchewan — especially considering Government initiatives toward its Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan.

By the end of 2019, we travelled throughout the province and interviewed 489 people in urban, rural, and remote communities. Of these, approximately one quarter were youth, and the remainder were participants from across ministries, service providers, community members (including families of young people who have used services), and representatives from First Nations and Métis communities, RCMP, and Provincial Court Judges.

The young people we met provided a rich perspective of their lived experiences and offered ways in how to better a system that can meet at least their basic need for service. All other stakeholders were willing to contribute their perspective on how to improve the system in order to see young people better served. Our preliminary observation is that although some youth have experienced responsive and effective services, there remain many gaps in ensuring consistent, comprehensive, and evidence-informed mental health and addictions services that meet the needs of all young people in the province. We anticipate releasing this report later this year and will make recommendations for improvements.



Photo courtesy of Pinehouse Photography Club

"It's okay to suffer. It's okay to hurt. But it's not okay to do it alone."

— Youth Quote

Collaboration Key to Systemic IMPROVEMENT

Pursuant to section 14(3)(b) of *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act*, part of the role of our office is to advise or make recommendations to any minister responsible for services to children or youth on any matter relating to their interests and well-being. Although we may have differing perspectives from time to time, we know that our office and the ministries, agencies, and public health entities serving children and youth in Saskatchewan are working towards the same

goal — services that create the best possible results for children and youth. This is why we value working in collaboration with ministries to influence and support improvements to policies, practices, and legislation that will create systemic change in the best interests of our young people. While maintaining our independence is key, working together through creative collaboration can have significant results that meet everyone's goals and mandates.



Photo courtesy of Pinehouse Photography Club

This year, we concluded some very important work with the Ministry of Corrections and Policing on the topic of youth suicide to which we referred in previous Annual Reports. Our advocacy on this issue resulted in a thematic review of suicide attempts by youth involved with the criminal justice system. Through this review, it became clear the Ministry of Corrections and Policing had relevant policies, practices, and tools available to assist in identifying and addressing suicide risk among the youth it serves. However, our assessment of these circumstances also identified several potential opportunities to strengthen protections to youth.

We recognize the mandate of the Ministry of Corrections and Policing lies primarily in advancing public safety by reducing youth criminality and promoting accountability. We also note there are other systems in place in Saskatchewan with a mandate to address youth mental health and/or social issues contributing to suicidal behaviour. However, a number of the critical injury and death notifications received by our office include deaths by suicide and suicide attempts by youth involved in the justice system. Most of these cases involve youth serving a community-based order indicating this is a particularly high-risk population. It is well known that the pre-existing vulnerability of young people that come into contact with the justice system is a risk factor for youth suicide. The Ministry and our office agreed there is an onus on the justice system to do what it can to mitigate the risk of self-harm for the youth it serves.

For its part, we commend the Ministry of Corrections and Policing for its willingness to work collaboratively with our office to explore the various ways in which the justice system in Saskatchewan protects young people from suicide, and for its sincere effort to work towards implementing opportunities for improvement. As a result of this collaboration, the Ministry developed a Critical Injury and Death Workplan (CID Workplan), encompassing many of the issues we identified as critical to address, and kept the Advocate informed on the progress of its implementation.

Many positive and concrete changes have been made by the Ministry of Corrections and Policing over the time our systemic file has been open. These are highlighted below:

- The Ministry undertook a policy review with managers and supervisors regarding issues of non-compliance to policies and standards
- A Workload Review was completed to evaluate all policies and procedures with a view to transformational change to improve service provision and the ability to meet standards. This included surveying frontline staff on their perspectives
- The Ministry began screening all youth serving community orders for risk of suicide
- All community youth workers are now required to be trained in Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)
- Required referrals to mental health services are occurring more frequently. Combined with increased documentation, follow-up, and oversight, these developments will help to ensure youth are supported in accessing the services they require
- Clinical oversight of youth who are identified to be at risk of suicide has increased, as has supervisory follow-up on recommendations arising from that oversight or from internal reviews of critical injuries and deaths
- Standardized methods for requesting health information have been developed
- Policy has been developed to better communicate risk and better connect youth to outside supports upon release from custody
- Development of procedures for the better identification of, and planning for, youth on remand with complex needs has been written into policy
- Increased emphasis has been placed on follow-up referrals to mental health and addictions services to ensure youth are supported in their engagement with these supports
- A noted increase in alerts/documentation of individuals who are at risk of suicide and increase in safety planning when required

Photo courtesy of Pinehouse Photography Club



The Ministry advised it has greatly appreciated our review and recommendations. Further, it has stated its intention to ensure an increased emphasis on the oversight of programs to improve the implementation of the actions identified through our review in the interest of preventing further injuries to youth.

As a result of these efforts, our office is satisfied the Ministry has taken, and will continue to take, a serious look at this issue and how it can discharge its responsibility to protect the youth it serves from all forms of harm — including suicide. We will continue to assess all notifications of suicide attempts or deaths by suicide on a case-by-case basis to determine whether further engagement and collaboration on this topic is required.

It is evident that suicide is a pervasive issue, poses significant risk to young people, and every child-serving system has a role to play in prevention and intervention. As reported in 2018, we have been examining the potential for changes within the child welfare system to better protect the young people who rely on its services. Resulting from our work in this area, we opened a systemic file in late 2018 with the Ministry of Social Services. Given the Ministry's strong processes of assessments related to a child's strengths and needs, and for making referrals to mental health services when deemed necessary, the Ministry is well-positioned to identify and address suicide risk among the young people it serves.

Our independent review of suicide attempts and deaths by suicide, of which we are notified by the Ministry of Social Services, reflects opportunities for the Ministry to strengthen protections to children and youth through changes to policy, practice and training. Some of these areas include requiring both caseworkers and foster parents to be trained in suicide prevention and intervention skills. It also includes having caseworkers screen for suicide risk at specific points in service provision, and follow-up with mental health service providers after a referral is made. The latter action will help to ensure youth are attending services and provide any support required to assist with engagement.

In early 2019, the Ministry advised it is committed to enhancing service provision and that its officials were meeting to examine the feasibility of our suggestions with respect to resource requirements and priorities. The Advocate looks forward to hearing about the Ministry's plan to address our concerns and to seeing positive change in this important system.

USING A RIGHTS-BASED LENS TO INFLUENCE LEGISLATION, REGULATIONS, AND POLICY

In the spirit of supporting improvements to all child and youth-serving systems, the Advocate has appreciated invitations to directly consult on amendments to, and/or development of, policy and legislation impacting children and youth. While remaining independent and non-partisan, we take every opportunity to lend our child-rights expertise to move the dial towards greater respect for, and protection of, the rights of young people. Taking a child-rights approach to these processes is the most effective way to ensure the best interests of young people are met and, ultimately, protect them from harm.

In 2019, we were invited by the Ministry of Education to provide our rights-based lens to its policy on supporting students with life-threatening medical conditions and to the development of a staff training portal on gender and sexual diversity.

Through our advocacy on this policy piece, we were successful in ensuring the education system identifies mental health conditions as potentially life-threatening and, therefore, requiring individual care plans/emergency response plans in the same manner and to the same level as students with physical conditions. The Ministry also accepted our suggestion to enhance policy by ensuring appropriate sharing of information on risks to health, safety, and well-being when students transfer from one institution to another. (The latter feedback from our office was to ensure consistency with the Ministry's acceptance of the recommendations put forward in our 2018 investigation report, *When Every Second Matters*.)

Our office also was invited by the Ministry of Justice to provide feedback on the amendments of the *Youth Justice Administration Act* and its Regulations that came into effect on October 1, 2019. The Ministry accepted many of our

recommendations to strengthen safeguards around the use of searches, seclusion, force, and physical restraints. Additionally, we were pleased to see improvements to procedures ensuring youth in custody are expressly made aware of facility rules and their ability to appeal various decisions. Although the amendments did not go as far in many respects as we believe are required for the Ministry to meet its child rights obligations, we will continue to use our processes of advocacy and investigation to monitor individual circumstances as required.

While the mandate of our office does not extend past provincial borders, many of the issues that impact the rights of children and youth in Saskatchewan are issues across Canada. As a result, the Advocate must closely monitor the broader landscape of collective challenges faced by young people across the country and, at times, turn our mind to systemic solutions for positive change on a national level. We do this through invitation, by our own decision, or through our affiliation with the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates (Council). Although there are child advocates in most provinces and territories, children and youth are impacted every day by legislation, policies, practices, and decisions at the federal level that fall outside the jurisdiction of these offices. Yet, there is currently no statutory body to act as an independent oversight mechanism for federally regulated services impacting children and youth.

This gap in accountability disproportionately impacts Indigenous children and youth, particularly those children living on-reserve to whom service provision is primarily the responsibility of the federal government. Such a disparity is unacceptable and, in our view, discriminatory. Member of Parliament Anne Quach agrees with our position and consulted our office prior and during the drafting of the bill she intended to present.

Unfortunately, the Bill for a National Commissioner sponsored by MP Quach did not receive royal assent prior to the 2019 federal election. However, we continue to advocate alongside the Canadian Council for Child and Youth Advocates for the creation of a National Commissioner for children at the federal level as one of the best ways to hold the Government of Canada to account in its obligations to keep the best interests of children and youth as a primary consideration in any matter affecting them. We have since been working with the Council to lend our expertise on this matter in preparation for a presentation before the Senate by the President. We remain hopeful that the federal government will recognize its obligations and rectify this disparity.

While the office of the Advocate always welcomes and appreciates the opportunity to work proactively to provide a child-rights lens in the drafting of legislation, regulations, or policy, we emphasize the importance of all levels of government building capacity in performing Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs).² This will allow the system to consider how the rights and interests of children and youth will be impacted by its decisions or actions — either directly or indirectly — and to continually assess the impact of that decision or action following its implementation.

² <http://cricacommunity.org/>

"[...] you are not going to change youth, without talking to youth about it."

— Youth Quote



Photo courtesy of Pinehouse Photography Club

Preventative Frameworks for Better OUTCOMES

It is a priority of the Advocate's office to promote and support service delivery from a preventative framework. One of the ways we do this is by monitoring our statistics and keeping informed of the risks to safety and well-being of children and youth in receipt of public services.

Assessing intake calls to our office, in addition to monitoring our statistics on child deaths and injuries, provides a snapshot of information that allows our office to not only respond to resolve these issues, but also to monitor broader themes. By taking an overarching view of these trends, we identify gaps and issues, and advocate for a systemic response.

Over the past five years, the trendlines related to our advocacy functions have remained relatively the same. On average, our office receives approximately 1500 advocacy requests per year. Disagreement with case plans and case management issues remain the leading cause of concern for our callers.



Contact with family and being unsatisfied with placements for children in out-of-home care are also ongoing, longstanding issues. We know keeping families together and maintaining these bonds is paramount to their wellbeing and we continue to advocate for preventative services and case planning that keeps the family together when safe to do so.

Lack of supports and receiving services in a timely manner also continue to be of concern. It is evident within our work that young people are extremely vulnerable, suffer numerous issues, and are often at the mercy of multiple systems and stakeholders both within and across entities. Young people not receiving the supports they require, when needed, increases the risk to their safety and well-being. Ensuring there is adequate resources and encouraging supports to work together are a main focus of our advocacy efforts.

In 2019, we saw a sharp increase in child deaths with 34 notifications, as compared to an average of 21 reported deaths over the previous five years. As per previous years, the increase was found within the 0–5 and 11–15-year-old age groups. Nearly half of the children who died were two years old or younger. This trend is likely a result of the vulnerabilities

inherent to their young age. However, at the time of this report's release, causes of death among this age group were largely unclear due to a lack of completed coroner reports. The causes that are known included medical complications arising from extreme prematurity, illness and, in one case, alleged homicide. However, in five infant deaths for which the Coroner's Service was either unable to determine cause or has not yet completed its investigation, sleep-associated risk factors were present or suspected at the time of death. Unsafe sleeping practices have been a persistent concern for our office over the years and we are continuing to follow the issue and explore best practices for prevention in other jurisdictions.

Another ongoing issue we see is the risk to young people related to suicide and self-harm. Taken together, deaths by suicide, suicide attempts, and serious incidents of self-harm accounted for 28% of all critical injury and death notifications received by our office. We continue to advocate for individual children and youth to receive the mental health and/or addictions support they require when they or their representatives contact our office. As has been highlighted throughout this report, we also continue our efforts to influence systemic improvements to

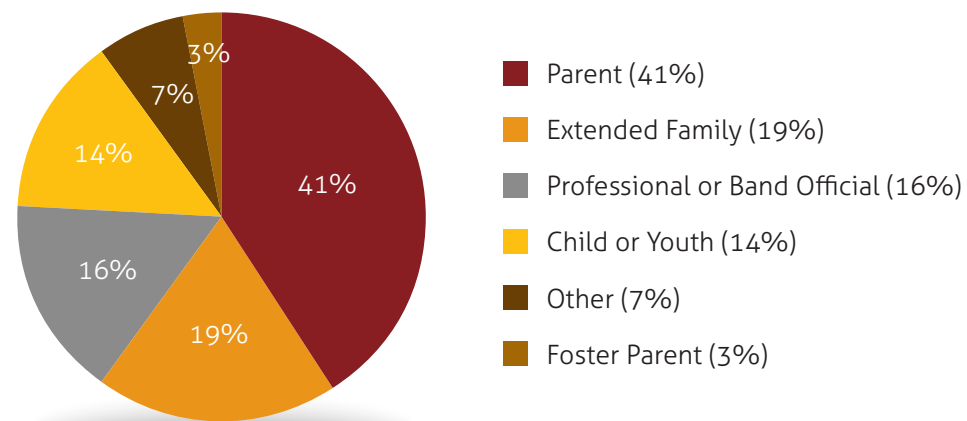
the accessibility and efficacy of mental health supports to children and youth.

It is no surprise that the number of Indigenous children and youth represented in the critical injury and death notifications received by our office continues to reflect their disproportionate representation within the child welfare and justice systems. In 2019, 85% of the children and youth that died and 90%³ of the those critically injured were Indigenous. This ongoing trend is unacceptable and highlights the urgency with which our province must embrace reconciliation, and with which all sectors must work together to improve outcomes for Indigenous children. Equity for Indigenous children and youth is top of mind for our office in all efforts to influence public policy, legislation, and on-the-ground practices of child-serving systems. As we learn more about the implementation of *An Act Respecting First Nation, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families*, it is our sincere hope this will be a positive step towards reconciliation, as well as further transformative and inter-sectoral change.

³ This percentage is calculated based on the actual number of youth who sustained a critical injury. The ACY was notified of critical injuries to 31 youth. 1 youth experienced 3 separate injuries, bringing the total number of injuries to 33. 28 out of 31 youth were Indigenous.

Intake and Common Issues Data

WHO CONTACTED THE ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN 2019*

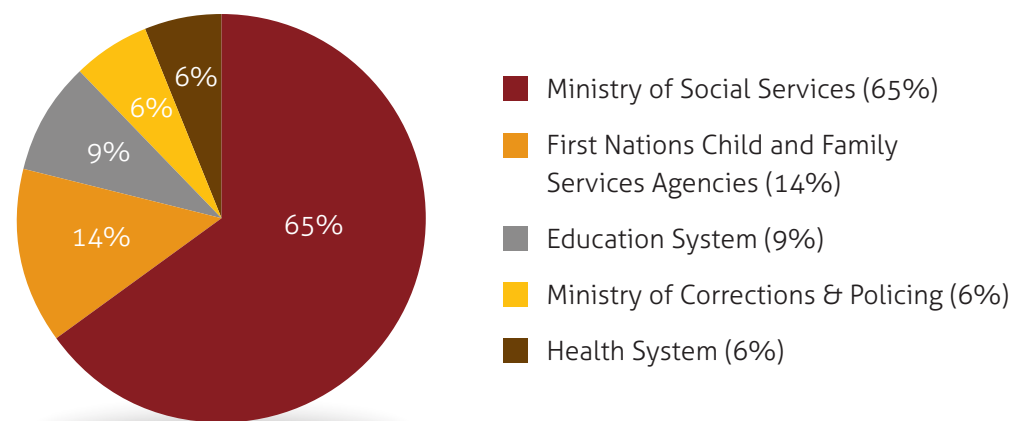


* Advocacy files only.

Parent includes parents, stepparents, non-custodial parents, legal guardians, caregivers, alternate caregivers, and persons of sufficient interest.

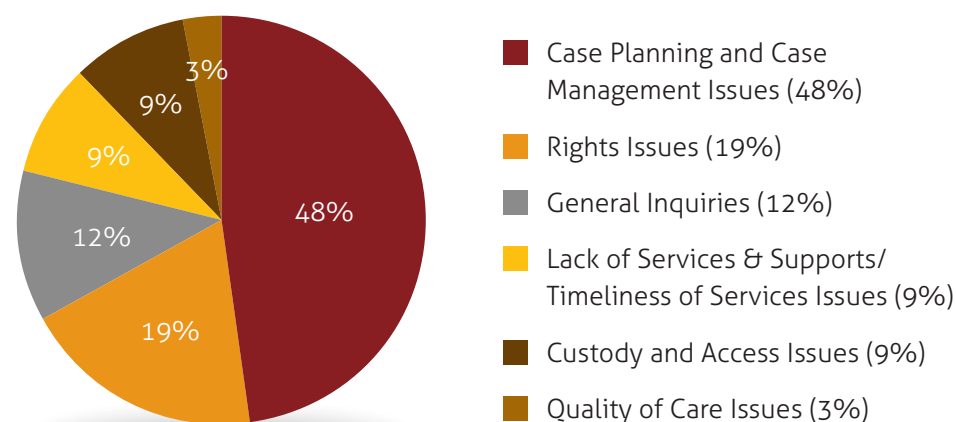
Other includes interested third parties such as babysitters, neighbours, or anonymous callers.

MINISTRIES OR AGENCIES THE ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH RECEIVED CALLS ABOUT IN 2019*



* Advocacy files for ministries and agencies within our jurisdiction.

MOST COMMON ISSUES FOR THE ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN 2019



General Inquiries represents issues that require a referral to another resource or agency.

Custody and Access Issues are beyond the mandate of our office. They also require referral to other resources or agencies.

Child Death and Injury Data

2019 CHILD DEATH DATA

Gender	Deaths	Total: 34
Male	16	
Female	18	
Ethnicity	Deaths	Total: 34
First Nations and Métis ⁴	29	
Non-First Nations or Métis	5	
Unknown	0	
Age	Deaths	Total: 34
0 to 5	15	
6 to 10	2	
11 to 15	9	
16 to 18	7	
19+	1	
Type of Service at Time of Death ⁵	Total: 35 ⁶	
CFS – Out-of-home care	8	
CFS – Other	12	
CFS – No Active Services	13	
Corrections – Custody (open and secure)	0	
Corrections – Community	2	
Corrections – No Active Services	0	

⁴ This category includes children and youth who are Métis, status and non-status First Nations, and who have been identified as Indigenous by either the Ministry involved or by the Coroner.

⁵ The ACY is notified of the death of a child or youth who is currently receiving, or has recently received, child and family services (CFS) by the Ministry of Social Services or by a First Nations Child and Family Services agency. These services include out-of-home care, as well as other types of services such as investigations of child abuse or neglect, services provided to support families in their homes, support services to older youth so that they can live independently, etc. Children and youth living in the care of a "person having sufficient interest" pursuant to section 23 of *The Child and Family Services Act* are not considered to be in care and are captured in the category of "other" child and family services. The ACY is also notified of deaths of young people currently receiving, or who have recently received, services from the Ministry of Corrections and Policing. These notifications include youth who are in custody (either sentenced or remanded) and those serving a community sentence.

⁶ One youth was receiving services from both the Ministry of Corrections & Policing and the Ministry of Social Services, Child and Family Programs at the time of death.

⁷ When available, information reported as to the cause of death is determined from the Coroner's Reports, which are pending for a number of 2019 deaths. In the absence of a Coroner's Report, cause of death may be obtained from autopsy reports and other information reported by the Ministry involved. The category of "Cause Not Available Yet" is used when the ACY has not received reliable information on the cause of death. This is to be distinguished from the category of "Undetermined", which is used by the Coroner where the cause of death has been reviewed by the Coroner but cannot be determined.

⁸ See footnote #7.

⁹ The term "medically fragile" is used by the ACY to describe the death of a child or youth that was caused by a condition or circumstances present at birth that was likely to lead to their death. This is different than the category of "illness", which refers to a new or unexpected natural disease.

¹⁰ Although final Coroner Reports are not yet available for these deaths, in both cases charges of murder have been laid.

¹¹ This youth died from fentanyl and methamphetamine toxicity, as per the autopsy report. The Report of the Medical Examiner has not been received from AB, therefore the manner (i.e. suicide/accident) is not known.

¹² These 2 deaths were the result of accidental asphyxiation and CO2 poisoning.

2019 CHILD DEATH – IDENTIFIED CAUSES

Cause	Male	Female	Total: 34
Cause Not Available Yet ⁷	6	4	10
Undetermined ⁸	1	1	2
Suicide	2	5	7
Medically Fragile ⁹	2	1	3
Homicide	2	0	2 ¹⁰
Motor Vehicle Accident	1	2	3
Hit by Motor Vehicle	0	1	1
Fire	0	1	1
Illness	1	1	2
Drowning	0	0	0
Drug/Alcohol Toxicity	0	1	1 ¹¹
Other	1	1	2 ¹²

UPDATE – CAUSE OF DEATHS 2018

When we released our 2018 Annual Report, we did not have data on the cause of 7 of the 20 deaths that occurred in 2018. We have now received Coroner Reports for 6 of these 7 deaths.

In four of these cases, the cause of death was classified as “undetermined”. These included 2 infants for which a cause could

not be identified, however sleep associated risk factors were noted to be present at time of death. A third infant death was classified as undetermined as the Coroner could not find any anatomical or other explanation as to the cause. In the fourth case, circumstances did not allow for an identification of cause.

One death involved an infant who was medically fragile due to extreme prematurity, and one involved a youth who died in accidental circumstances related to environmental exposure with alcohol as a contributing factor.

No information was available on the seventh outstanding 2018 death at the time of this report.

2019 CRITICAL INJURY DATA

Gender	Critical Injuries	Total: 33 ¹³
Male	19	
Female	14	
Ethnicity	Critical Injuries	Total: 33
First Nations and Métis ¹⁴	28	
Non-First Nations or Métis	4	
Unknown	1	
Age	Critical Injuries	Total: 33
0 to 5	3	
6 to 10	2	
11 to 15	11	
16 to 18	14	
19+	3	
Type of Service at Time of Injury ¹⁵		Total: 36 ¹⁶
CFS – Out-of-home care		12
CFS – Other Services		4
CFS – No Active Services		3
Corrections – Custody (open and secure)		1 ¹⁷
Corrections – Community		16
Corrections – No Active Services		0

¹³ The totals referenced throughout the critical injury charts reflect a total of 33 injuries involving 31 youth. One 17-year-old First Nations male youth experienced 3 separate injuries in the form of 2 suicide attempts and 1 incident of self-harm.

¹⁴ This category includes children and youth who are Métis, status and non-status First Nations and who have been identified as Indigenous by either the Ministry involved or by the Coroner.

¹⁵ The ACY is notified of the critical injury of a child or youth who is currently receiving, or has recently received, child and family services (CFS) by the Ministry of Social Services or by a First Nations Child and Family Services agency. These services include out-of-home care, as well as other types of services such as investigations of child abuse or neglect, services provided to support families in their homes, and support services to older youth so that they can live independently. Children and youth living in the care of a “person having sufficient interest” pursuant to section 23 of *The Child and Family Services Act* are not considered to be in care and are captured under in the category of “other” child and family services. The ACY is also notified of critical injuries of young people currently receiving, or who have recently received, services from the Ministry of Corrections and Policing. These notifications include youth who are in custody (either sentenced or remanded) and those serving a community sentence.

¹⁶ Three youth were receiving services from both the Ministry of Corrections and Policing and the Ministry of Social Services, Child and Family Programs at the time of their critical injury. Two of these youth were in out-of-home care and one was in receipt of other services.

¹⁷ This youth had escaped from open custody and was in the community at the time the injury occurred.

2019 CRITICAL INJURIES: IDENTIFIED CAUSES

Cause	Male	Female	Total: 33
Suicide Attempt	4	4	8 ¹⁸
Self Harm	1	3	4
Motor Vehicle Accident	0	0	0
Hit by Motor Vehicle	0	1	1
Drug/Alcohol Toxicity (Accidental)	1	0	1
Assault with a Knife or Blade ¹⁹	2	2	4
Shooting	2	0	2
Physical Assault - Other	2	1	3
Sexual Assault	0	3	3 ²⁰
Burn	0	0	0
Fall	0	0	0
Suspected Non-Accidental and/or Child Abuse	1	0	1
Other Accident	0	0	0
Illness	4	0	4
Other	2	0	2 ²¹

¹⁸ 2 of these attempts were by the same male youth.

¹⁹ In previous Annual Reports, this category was reflected as “Stabbing”. It has been changed to reflect the various ways in which knives, blades and other sharp weapons can be used to cause injury.

²⁰ 1 of these incidents was re-classified by the Ministry of Social Services as a Medium Impact Occurrence, which does not require notification to the ACY under the Ministry’s policy. However, our Annual Report is meant to reflect the work of the ACY throughout the year. Advocacy follow-up was conducted following notification, thus it is reflected here.

²¹ 1 of these injuries was the result of a dog bite during a canine police pursuit. The second case involved a youth charged with stabbing two other individuals, causing one death. This youth was being provided courtesy service by the Ministry of Social Services on behalf of another province. The province of origin determined it would not review the matter further and the Ministry rescinded its notification to our office. However, as advocacy follow-up was done by our staff in this year, it is reflected here to account for our work.



Budget and Staff

Non-Statutory Expenditures	2018–19 Budget	2019–20 Budget
Personal Services	\$1,865,000	\$1,977,000
Contractual Services	\$421,000	\$421,000
Advertising, Printing & Publishing	\$38,000	\$38,000
Travel & Business	\$102,000	\$102,000
Supplies & Services	\$8,000	\$8,000
Capital Assets	\$22,000	\$22,000
Budgetary Total	\$2,456,000	\$2,568,000

Statutory Expenditures		
Personal Services	\$228,000	\$228,000
Statutory Total	\$228,000	\$228,000
Total	\$2,684,000	\$2,796,000

Advocate and Staff (at December 31, 2019)

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Leeann Palmer

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Darren Hubick
Meredith Newman
Jacqueline Peters
Cheryl Starr
Marcia Steuart

INVESTIGATORS:
Connie Braun
Marci Macomber
Joni Sereda (Term)
Karen Topolinski

DIRECTOR OF ADMINISTRATION:
Bernie Rodier

COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR:
Kelli Thomson (Term)

ADMINISTRATION SUPERVISOR:
Caroline Sookocheff

EXECUTIVE ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT:
Wanda George

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANTS:
Michelle Beattie
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