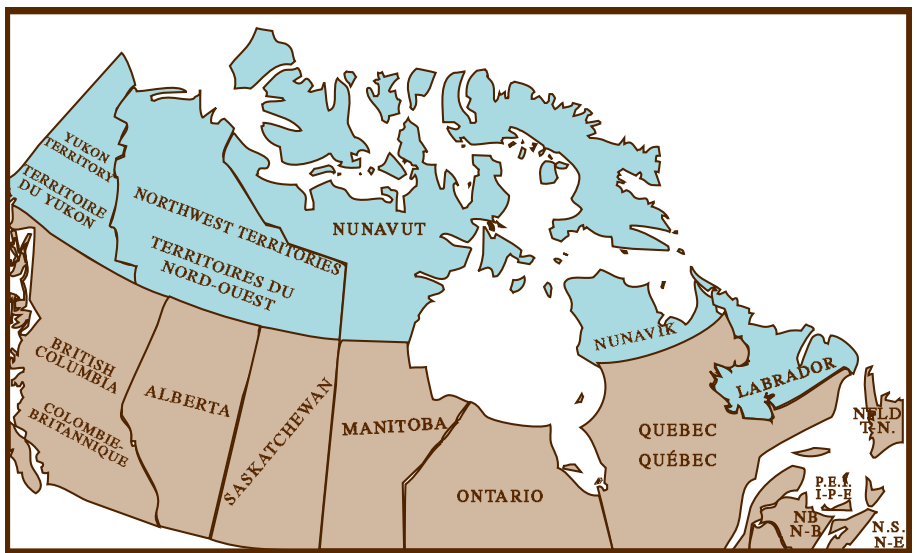




The seniors of Canada's Far North

The Far North stirs up images of long winters, the midnight sun and magnificent snowscapes. But beyond these postcard images, we know very little of the life of seniors living in Canada's northern regions.

To learn more about this reality, NACA held a meeting in Yellowknife, in the spring of 2003, where members were treated to a glimpse of the life and diversity north of the 60th parallel. Greeted warmly, they were impressed by the intensity of community life, the relaxed lifestyle, the easy access to political decision-makers and the great love of northern residents for their land. At the same time, Council members were made aware of the complex challenges facing seniors in the North.



This issue of *Expression* looks at the situation of seniors in Canada's Far North – those living in the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, in Nunavut, and in the regions of Nunavik (northern Quebec) and Labrador. It paints a picture of diversity, of challenges, of resources and especially of the vitality in Canada's most northern communities.

Lloyd Bruner
NACA member
Hay River, Northwest Territories





NACA

The National Advisory Council on Aging consists of up to 18 members from all parts of Canada and all walks of life. The members bring to Council a variety of experience and expertise to advise the federal Minister of Health, also Minister Responsible for Seniors, his colleagues and the public on the situation of seniors and the measures needed to respond to the aging of the Canadian population. Current NACA members are:

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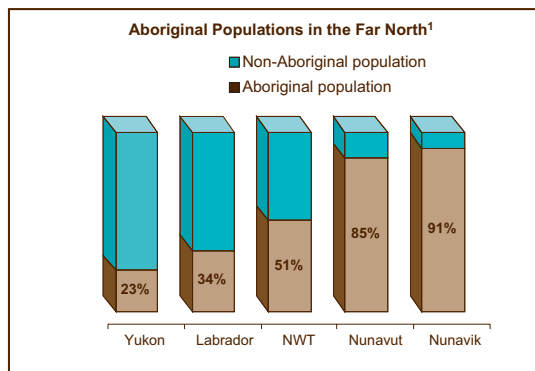
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The people and the land

Canada's Far North is immense. The three territories of Yukon, Northwest Territories (NWT) and Nunavut alone account for 40% of our country's land mass. Yet their residents form only 3% of Canada's population. These statistics can only give a notion of the distances between communities in the North!



Native people (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) share Canada's northern lands with non-Aboriginal populations. The proportion of Aboriginal people in the various regions varies from one

quarter for the Yukon to 91% in Nunavik.

Cultural diversity is characteristic of the North, among Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people alike. For example, in the NWT, there are nine recognized official languages! There are also vast differences between seniors in towns and those in far-flung communities; between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal seniors; and among seniors within a community.

Young people greatly outnumber seniors in the North. The percentage of people aged 65 and older varies between 2% for Nunavut and 6% for the Yukon, which is a far cry from the 13% of seniors for Canada as a whole. As life conditions are harsher in the North, especially for Native people, certain governments and organizations often consider people aged 55 or older as seniors.

The factors of geography, climate and demography so particular to the North, as well as the profound cultural

¹ Source: Canadian Community Health Survey, 2001.



changes that have overtaken Aboriginal communities, have a significant impact on the lives of seniors in Canada's Far North.

■ The cost of living

Living in the Far North is expensive. Distance increases the cost of housing, food, transportation and all the other necessities of life – so much so that the Yukon and NWT governments have seen fit to provide an income supplement to help low-income seniors face the high cost of living.

Housing

Because materials come from far away, building and renovating costs in the North are much higher. In Quebec's Nunavik region, for example, a single home costs \$196 823 – three times more than the average cost for an equivalent house in that province.² As a result, many households must live in subsidized housing. If the waiting lists for these homes are long, seniors are fortunately considered a priority. With the exception of the Yukon, more seniors in the North live with family members than alone. This cohabitation reflects the lack of housing and at the same time, the cultural tradition of extended family living. The line between family support and abuse is sometimes a very subtle one. For example

Housing in the Inuit Territory

Since the 1950s, permanent housing has replaced Inuit seasonal homes. Unfortunately, the number and quality of homes remain insufficient. A recent report suggests that to meet growing needs, 8800 new homes would have to be built in the next 5 years, including 5500 for Nunavut alone, and existing homes must be repaired.

The lack of housing persists because of the high unemployment rate, the high costs of homes, and the lack of financing for subsidized housing. The inadequacy of housing and overcrowding further contributes to ongoing problems of poor mental health, family violence and respiratory illness.

Source: Inuit Tapirisat of Canada.

a senior who qualifies for subsidized housing may soon find other family members moving in. Whether this is an act of support or a situation of abuse is not always clear.

Heating

Keeping warm is a matter of survival in Canada's Far North, and several northern governments subsidize seniors' heating costs. Of course, it helps if the heating system works. **Palma Berger**, a former social housing manager in Dawson City (Yukon), remembers many phone calls from seniors who complained that the cold kept them awake because the furnace had broken down. Since there were no mechanics or plumbers in town, she advised women: "Get to know or marry someone who is mechanically inclined!"

² Obed, Natan, "Looking North: The Housing Crisis in Canadian Inuit Communities", *Canadian Housing*, Spring 2002, Vol. 19, No. 1.

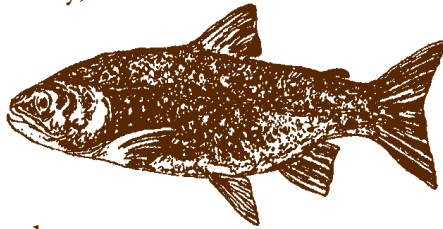
Illustrations on page 4 and 5: NWT Territories Traditional Food Fact Sheets, reproduced by kind permission of Northwest Territories Health and Social Services



Food

Outside of urban areas, most Aboriginal seniors of the North have known the traditional diet of caribou, seal, whale, fish, other seafood

and berries. These foods, rich in proteins, nutrients and good fats, are far less expensive than products imported from the south. Not only are those who hunt and fish, even occasionally, slimmer and in better health, they also live in closer harmony with traditional values and the earth.



Much research has been done to measure the risks of contamination of traditional foods by pollutants. Based on the results of these studies, information campaigns have been initiated to assure people of the safety of these foods.

For the communities and people not relying on hunting and fishing, food comes from the south at great cost. Fresh milk, eggs, bread, fruit and vegetables are flown in from Canada's warmer regions. Despite subsidized transport costs, a grocery cart costs 1.3 times more in Labrador, and twice more in the outlying communities of Nunavut and the NWT than in the southern part of the country!

Transportation

Because the cost of travel is prohibitive and public transportation is practically non-existent in most communities, friends and neighbours come to the rescue. **Yvonne Howe** explains how in the small hamlet of



Destruction Bay, where she lives, people don't plan a trip to town without taking along their neighbours' shopping lists. In Tuktoyaktuk, NWT, as soon as the sea is frozen, ice roads are built so supplies can come straight from the Okanagan, making fresh products much more accessible and affordable. **Helen Gruben** recounts the excitement when the truck is seen coming from the ice road. "We welcome it with open arms!" But solutions are not always evident and lack of transportation can prevent northern residents' access to many services and products that southerners take for granted.

Health

In the Far North as elsewhere in Canada, health depends on a number of factors (including those described above) so it is not surprising that the challenges of the North affect the health of its people.

Health status

Seniors in the North generally describe themselves as being in poorer health than do other Canadian seniors. In the NWT, there is a high rate of chronic illness among seniors, including respiratory disease, diabetes and lung cancer. In addition, although the number of cases is low, the rate of tuberculosis is 15 times higher than among Canadian seniors as a



whole. Injuries are very frequent in the North and prevention is considered a public health priority.

There is a significant gap between the health of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, which can be explained in part by differences in socio-economic conditions, lifestyles and access to care. The Inuit territories have a life expectancy that is clearly lower than that of the rest of the country. A recent study revealed that one quarter of Labrador's Aboriginal people



aged 55 and over had diminished physical capacity that limits their activities, and one eighth needed home care.

Access to health care

Given the vastness of the North, access to health institutions and professionals is limited. Nursing stations often replace hospitals, and nurses play a crucial role. Seniors requiring specialized care are forced to travel south, which, in many cases, results in isolation and intense cultural shock that is hardly conducive to healing. (But on a positive note, waiting lists are not an issue because transferred patients often receive priority treatment). Inuit Tapirisat President, **Jose Kusugak**, explained to the Romanow Commission that many Inuit “feel powerless and intimidated” by the current health system because of geography

and language barriers. Recent surveys have confirmed that Aboriginal people from the arctic regions consult health professionals far less than non-Aboriginal people. In rural communities, transport difficulties also limit access to dentists, optometrists and other health specialists. Certain regions are currently exploring the possibilities of telehealth to exchange medical information, to increase access to professional support, and to break the isolation of patients being treated outside of their community.

■ Lifestyles

Physical inactivity is a serious problem in Canada and extends north of the 60th parallel. Indeed, recent data seem to indicate that seniors of the Far North are less physically active than Canadian seniors as a whole. To counter the health problems associated with lack of activity, the Yukon government has developed an *Active Living Strategy* that appears to be having a positive effect. It is hoped that the *Canadian Seniors Games* taking place in Whitehorse, in 2004, will also contribute to encouraging physical activity among seniors of the North.

Benefits of gardening

To gain the benefits of physical activity and social connection, some 20 seniors in Carmacks (Yukon) took part in a greenhouse gardening project. A good number of 70- and 80-year-old seniors grew vegetables for the first time in their lives! Families and friends noted that participants watched less television and had a great many stories to share.



Smoking is quite widespread in the North. For example, in the NWT, 33% of seniors smoke compared to 12% of Canadian seniors as a whole. In Quebec's Nunavik region, culturally appropriate materials have been developed to help residents in their efforts to quit smoking.

Little statistical data exist on *alcohol* consumption. However, although seniors of the NWT and Native people do not consume alcohol as regularly as Canadian seniors as a whole, data show that those who do consume a greater volume of alcohol.

■ Disadvantaged seniors

In the Northwest Territories and in Nunavut, half of seniors receive the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS). For its part, the Yukon holds two very contradictory records: the highest average income in Canada, and the highest percentage of people with low income. The inequalities are very marked between its capital city, Whitehorse, and the other communities. In the current economy, and despite some improvement, Aboriginal people are clearly at a significant disadvantage in terms of education, employment and revenue.

When the **Yukon Council on Aging** visited all communities in the Territory last summer to inform seniors of their

rights to pension benefits, it was surprised by the very large number of seniors who qualified but had not applied for GIS.

The problem is particularly pronounced for those with little schooling or who only speak an Aboriginal language, and has other consequences on daily life: many seniors are unfamiliar with the contents or unable to read the labels of food packages and medications. Public health staff have become aware of the need to visit the grocery store with seniors to explain the foods and help them make healthy choices.

Other difficulties come into play. Approximately one Aboriginal senior out of five has experienced residential schools. Among Inuit seniors, this proportion reaches close to 40%. As children, they were removed from their families, may have suffered abuse, and were subjected to the rejection of their culture, spirituality and language. These early-life experiences have left scars on entire communities. The **Aboriginal Healing Foundation** finances activities in which seniors are able to talk about the consequences of their residential school experience with respect to violence, drug abuse, and family life.

As elsewhere in Canada, abuse (see *Expression* 17-1 on senior abuse) is experienced by some seniors in the North. Representatives of the *Yukon*

"In Aboriginal communities, there are few people trained to fill out the forms for elders. There is often a language barrier that keeps the elders from understanding what information is required. Many are not even aware of the benefits."

Bobby Morgan, President of the Yukon Council on Aging



Council on Aging and of the Northwest Territories Council on Aging feel that the issue of abuse needs to be brought into the open and treated as a social priority. In the territory of Nunavut, older women have asked for an increased number of counsellors to deal with family violence.

■ The place of seniors

Traditionally, seniors have enjoyed great respect in the North. In this harsh environment, everyone recognizes the contributions seniors have made to the community, the economy and the institutions. As northern Aboriginal societies continue to undergo transformation, there are attempts to reinstate the important role of Elders.

For the unlearned, old age is winter.
For the learned, it is a time of harvest.

**The Honourable Stephen Kakfwi,
former NWT Premier**

Elders are those who, through their wisdom and experience, give advice. They are generally, but not always, the oldest members of the community. They have knowledge of traditional ceremonies and customs, and tell the history and legends of their people. Their role is also to make the next generations benefit from their experience of life.

In Nunavut, monthly meetings take place to allow elders to express their opinions and their needs. Through such meetings, they shared their concerns about youth

suicide. The result: camps will be organized to bring together elders and young people to facilitate sharing of traditional skills and the transmission of their heritage. The government is also trying to incorporate traditional Inuit knowledge into its programs and services and is making an effort to preserve oral tradition and maintain the diversity of dialects.

■ The greatness of the North

The Far North offers more to its inhabitants than difficulties. For Aboriginal communities, the land is intimately linked to a way of life and ancient traditions. It is also a land of inexpressible beauty offering wide open spaces, clean air, seasons of entire days and entire nights, a laid-back lifestyle and slow time. The intense community life in the Far North is cherished by all residents, some of whom were lured to settle there by the warmth of the welcome and the quality of life. Helping out is part of daily life in the North. Most seniors have people looking out for them in times of need. It is not rare for a senior to be offered wood for heating or meat by hunters. Helping goes

Mutual help and barter

Yvonne Howe is a visual artist living in a small village of about 30 inhabitants in the Yukon. Last year, returning from a hiking trip, she was in for a surprise: her water pipes had burst! There was then a second surprise: two friends were already digging to replace the pipes. As she couldn't afford the work or the material, she paid with her paintings!



in both directions and seniors participate actively in the community. Several seniors who have a pension provide financial assistance to other members of their families who are less fortunate.

■ From past to future

The traditions of warmth, community and resourcefulness of the people of the North have allowed them to survive and to thrive in one of the harshest environments in the world. Despite the cold, and despite the turmoil brought to Aboriginal communities by the arrival of new cultures and technologies, the communities of the Far North can count for the future on their enormous ability to adapt.

Current day seniors have straddled two worlds and they have to continue to adapt to major changes. Many, in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, are at some disadvantage in a society that has transformed beyond imagination in the course of their lifetime.

The programs and services must also adapt – to the particularities of the climate, the distances, the needs, the resources and the values of the Far North's diverse peoples, as well as to the very real challenges faced by the seniors in their communities.

Our thanks to Helen Gruben, Chris William, Yvonne Howe, Palma Berger, George Porter, Bobby Morgan and Jean Williamson who were kind enough to share their experiences of the challenges and fortunes of their lives in the Far North.

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<http://users.yknet.yk.ca/yukonseniors/>

NWT Seniors' Society (867) 920-7444
<http://www.elderweb.org/vis/sc/nwtseniors/>
 1-800-661-0878

Seniors Resource Centre (for Labrador)
 (719) 737-2333
<http://www.seniorsresource.ca/>
 1-800-563-5599

Nunavut Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth <http://www.gov.nu.ca/cley>

Kativik Regional Government (for Nunavik)
 (819) 964-2961
<http://www.krg.ca/> 1-877-964-2961

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