

**Advocate for Children and Youth Releases Special Report on the Youth Suicide Crisis in Northern Saskatchewan**

La Ronge – The Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth, Corey O’Soup, released the special report, *Shhh... LISTEN!! We Have Something to Say! Youth Voices from the North*. This report reflects a youth perspective of and voice on the issue of suicide and the challenges Indigenous children, youth and families face in northern Saskatchewan.

“The crisis of six young girls who died by suicide in northern Saskatchewan in October 2016 compelled our office to go North to listen and learn from the communities, families, stakeholders, and most importantly, our young people about this devastating issue,” O’Soup said in his report.

The experiences of Indigenous young people today and the pressures they face are different from that of previous generations. The objectives of the report focus on engaging with Indigenous youth in northern Saskatchewan to better understand youth suicide from their experiences and realities, and to honour their voice as part of this understanding.

“The staggering rates of suicide amongst our Indigenous people is disheartening and is one of the many consequences of colonization and residential schools. The future of our youth is compromised when we ignore their needs. We cannot accept this and holding our government to account with immediate action is critical to help our young people,” said O’Soup.

The report covers themes identifying why young people might think about suicide, resulting in several *Calls to Action* reflecting what the youth stated as important to providing a sense of wellness and to fulfilling their right to reach their full potential.

“This continues to be a crisis and we need to take immediate action to prevent more young people from dying while waiting for help. This involves full support from the federal, provincial and Indigenous governments, along with our professionals, families and communities. The youth have shown an incredible amount of courage here and we have an opportunity to do right by them,” says O’Soup.

The report also includes five *Calls to Action* made by the Advocate, which include both the provincial and federal governments partnering with the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations and Métis Nation – Saskatchewan to develop and further support new and existing suicide prevention plans. This effort should include, where necessary, collaboration between various government departments and/or financial support. The Advocate also asks that the federal government put an end to the inequities faced by Indigenous children and youth in Saskatchewan by fully implementing Jordan’s Principle. Finally, he calls for the provincial government to formally adopt Jordan’s Principle and support Indigenous communities in accessing resources available under the Principle.

“We acknowledge that provincial, federal and Indigenous governments have taken a number of steps to increase support to youth since the tragic events of last October, including investments in mental health

and public education,” O’Soup said. “While immediate financial supports are vital, these communities need sustainable resources and programs that they can rely on for years to come. Youth and their families need to be supported at all times and not only in periods of crisis.”

The Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent officer of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan. He leads a team of professionals who work on behalf of the province’s young people. Our vision is that the rights, interests and well-being of children and youth are respected and valued in our communities and in government legislation, policy, programs and practice.

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To get an electronic copy of this special report, please visit: [www.saskadvocate.ca](http://www.saskadvocate.ca).

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## **Backgrounder**

# ***Shhh... LISTEN!! We Have Something To Say! Youth Voices from the North***

### **Introduction:**

*Shhh... LISTEN!! We Have Something To Say!* is a special report prepared by the Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth. Released on December 5, 2017, the Advocate's team spent the last year in northern Saskatchewan meeting with Indigenous youth about their perceptions, realities, and lived experiences related to youth suicide. This work included presentations to over one thousand youth across 12 northern communities (north of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan) about our office and about this project. Of this, 264 indigenous youth volunteered to meet with us to talk about the topic of youth suicide in their communities. To inform this work prior to meeting with the youth, the team met with Elders, Chiefs, leaders, and communities for both support and guidance. The Advocate's team also had the support of the Elders and are very grateful for their wisdom, guidance, knowledge, and prayers before meeting with the youth and throughout the project to its conclusion.

This report followed two objectives:

1. to engage with Indigenous youth in northern Saskatchewan to better understand youth suicide from their perspective and to honour and reflect their voice as part of this understanding; and
2. to be a platform for the voices of these young people to be heard.

The young people we spoke with in northern Saskatchewan identified the many distinctive strengths of their peers, families and communities, but also the serious challenges they continue to face on a regular basis. Several themes emerged from the voices of the youth regarding their challenges and action needed to help them. What is striking about these themes is the reflection of the raw, yet honest accounts of how these young people see the issue of suicide due to their direct and indirect experiences with it. Their experiences and their needs are unique to their regions, yet their voices also mirror that of many Indigenous youth across this country who have similar needs. The below themes represent what the youth described as factors contributing to or impacting thoughts of suicide. Their responses are consistent with the abundance of literature in this area. Several subthemes to these main themes can be found in the body of the report.

- The Impact of Bullying and Cyberbullying
- Lack of Emotional Support
- The Impact of Substance Misuse
- Lack of Physical Safety
- Lack of Activities
- Impact on Emotional and Mental Wellness

Along with the themes identifying why young people might think about suicide, are a number of calls to action reflecting what the youth saw as important to providing a sense of wellness and to fulfilling their right to reach their full potential. The below themes are indicative of what is required by communities and by the provincial and federal governments to meet these young people's immediate needs. To be most effective, a holistic approach will be required to address all areas identified by the youth.

**Youth Calls to Action:**

We asked and they answered - below are the *Calls to Action* made by the youth:

- **Call to Action: Stop Bullying!**
  - Educate adults, parents, youth and communities on bullying
  - Take action when bullying is witnessed or reported
  
- **Call to Action: Increase Positive Emotional Support in The Community**
  - Create forums to increase meaningful peer, family and school support
  - Pay attention and reach out to the youth
  - See us, hear us – before it's too late
    - Listen
    - Understand
    - Take us seriously
    - Ask us what we need
  
- **Call to Action: Address Drugs and Alcohol in Our Communities**
  - Increased supports for adults and communities
  - Supports for youth
  
- **Call to Action: Keep us Safe!**
  - More security in the community
  
- **Call to Action: Provide Meaningful and Diverse Activities for Youth**
  - More activities needed
  
- **Call to Action: Help Us!**
  - Need for coping skills
  - Increased mental health resources in the community that meet youth needs
  - More and/or different options to enhance youth well-being
  - Suicide awareness education
  - Increased awareness of available supports

## **Advocate's Calls to Action**

The Advocate makes the following calls to action to take immediate steps toward addressing the youth calls to achieve an outcome where youth are empowered and part of the solution. This is consistent with their fundamental rights to be part of decision-making that affect them. The below calls are also to hold the provincial and federal governments to account in supporting Indigenous youth, communities and leadership in moving forward with immediate action.

**Call to Action:** The Government of Saskatchewan work in partnership with the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations to support a Saskatchewan First Nations Suicide Prevention Strategy. The development of this strategy should:

- include the perspectives of Indigenous youth;
- be supported and implemented in a way that increases the capacity of communities;
- involve partnerships, where needed, with provincial ministries such as Health, Education, and Social Services; and
- be financially supported by the provincial government, as required, as the lives of our children and youth are everyone's responsibility.

**Call to Action:** The Government of Saskatchewan work in partnership with the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan to further support the implementation of the existing Métis Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, ensuring that it:

- supports the implementation of the strategy in a way that increases the capacity of communities;
- involves partnerships, where needed, with provincial ministries such as Health, Education, and Social Services; and
- is financially supported by the provincial government, as required, as the lives of children and youth are everyone's responsibility.

**Call to Action:** The Government of Canada work with, and fully support, the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations and the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan to support their suicide prevention strategies, including providing financial support as required.

**Call to Action:** The Government of Canada put an end to the inequities faced by Indigenous children and youth in Saskatchewan by fully implementing Jordan's Principle.

**Call to Action:** The Government of Saskatchewan formally adopt Jordan's Principle and work in partnership with Indigenous governments, leaders, and communities to leverage the resources available under Jordan's Principle.