



Mayors of the 5 largest Cities in Canada's Prairie Provinces

July 18, 2023

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau
Prime Minister of Canada
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A3

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau:

We, the signatory mayors, acknowledge the traditional lands on which we reside are in Treaty 1, 4, 6 and 7 Territories and Métis homeland. Together, with the diverse Indigenous Peoples whose ancestors have called these lands home for centuries, we work to build great cities for today and future generations. As Mayors we are committed to advancing the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and are invested in working with our Indigenous partners to advance reconciliation, recognizing that all orders of government have a responsibility for this vital work.

In order to amplify the voices of Indigenous peoples within treaty lands that neighbor our cities, we are asking for:

1. A preliminary meeting with us as early as possible to discuss this urgent crisis in the Prairies. We would like to discuss a new framework that would support a new era of municipal-federal partnership on Indigenous-led programs for off-reserve Indigenous people.
2. A follow up meeting in person, with Indigenous partners, to determine how prairie cities can be at the table as partners to ensure there is an appropriate framework in place to support off-reserve Indigenous people, including ensuring the \$4 billion in Urban, Rural and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy investments can best integrate with municipal services.

We do not speak on behalf of Indigenous people and their needs. As partners, we hear and amplify their urgent calls for support.¹ Indigenous communities are developing and implementing solutions to address these complex issues but require cities, provinces and the federal government to do their part. We need culturally-appropriate housing and wrap-around supports, evidence-based treatment and recovery centres, gathering spaces and urban reserves. In partnership and through ongoing discussions with Indigenous leadership, we have scalable solutions, but don't have sufficient resources to meet the extent of the challenge we face. The crisis in our Prairie cities is proof that the current framework is failing both cities and failing off-reserve Indigenous peoples. We need the federal government to recognize their obligation to ensure the well-being of off-reserve Indigenous populations, and we need greater, aligned support from both our federal and provincial partners.

The Prairies have long been a gathering place for trade, commerce, ceremony and social connections among Indigenous people. While many Indigenous people grow and thrive in the urban setting of today's prairie cities, many do not. As Indigenous people are disproportionately impacted by houselessness, diminished mental health and substance use and drug poisonings, we lack the necessary resources to support this population as they deal with these interconnected public health crises, particularly in our downtowns.

The urgency of the crisis we are experiencing in prairie cities cannot be overstated, and our partnership must move forward urgently in response. Below is an overview of the challenges we are facing.

Houselessness and Encampments

Over half of First Nations people in Canada live in Western Canada, and Alberta has the second largest Métis population.² Winnipeg and Edmonton have the first and second largest urban Indigenous populations in Canada,³ and Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Calgary have the largest Métis populations in Canada. People who identify as Indigenous make up 11.5 percent of the City of Saskatoon's population⁴ and 10.2 percent of the City of Regina's population⁵. Indigenous people make a considerable contribution to the vibrancy, strength and economic vitality of prairie cities; however, due to the lasting impacts of colonialism, residential schools, ongoing systemic racism and intergenerational trauma, Indigenous people in urban centres are more likely to be in core housing need, are over-represented in the unhoused population, and are disproportionately impacted by the mental health and substance use crises.

¹ CBC. [“We need action”: Treaty 6 chiefs declare opioid crisis emergency](#). July 10, 2023.

² Statistics Canada. [The Daily](#). September 21, 2022.

³ Statistics Canada. [Census Metropolitan Areas with Largest Indigenous Population, 2021](#). September 21, 2022.

⁴ Statistics Canada. [Saskatoon CSD Census Profiles 2021, 2016](#)

⁵ Statistics Canada. [Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population Profile table](#)

These issues have only been exacerbated by the pandemic and its aftermath. In Edmonton, the unhoused population has doubled since 2019 to well over 3,000 individuals, and despite Indigenous people making up only 6 percent of Edmonton's overall population, they represent 60 percent of Edmonton's unhoused people. Similarly, in Saskatoon and Regina, 85 percent and 80 percent of unhoused people identify as Indigenous and in Winnipeg, 75 percent of unhoused people identify as Indigenous. Furthermore, of the 24,865 Indigenous households in Edmonton, 5,500 are in core housing need, projected to increase to more than 7,000 households in the next five years based on current trends. In the City of Saskatoon, the number of encampments grew from 116 in 2021 to 512 in 2022. The City of Edmonton received 5,090 encampment complaints in 2023, representing a 61 percent increase from last year.

Substance Use, the Drug Poisoning Crisis and Mental Health

The drug poisoning crisis, public use of illicit substances, and mental health crises cannot be separated from the legacy of intergenerational trauma. Responding to them meaningfully is essential to reconciliation, a shared goal that we fail to meet if we do not address these social issues. Between 2015 and 2021, the life expectancy dropped seven years for First Nations men and women living in Alberta due in part to drug poisoning deaths⁶. Recent modeling data from the Public Health Agency of Canada⁷ project an increasing number of opioid-related deaths that may occur in the coming months. Although Alberta no longer reports on drug poisoning deaths for First Nations people, in 2020 while First Nations people represented 22 percent of all opioid poisoning deaths in Alberta, they represented only 6 percent of the Alberta population.⁸ April was the deadliest month on record for drug poisoning deaths in Alberta, with 179 lives lost (76 in Calgary and 47 in Edmonton). According to Government of Alberta substance use data,⁹ EMS responses in Edmonton related to opioid-related events spiked to the highest level in the last 5 years (170 responses for the week of June 26). Hospitalizations related to substance use in the Edmonton Zone for Q1 in 2023 are higher than any of last year's quarters in 2022. In the City of Saskatoon, overdose incidents rose from 548 in 2019 to 903 in 2022.¹⁰

Impact on Emergency Services and Downtown Health

The intersecting issues of houselessness, declining mental health, substance use, and the drug poisoning crisis, as well as lack of adequate access to housing and wrap-around support services, are having a significant impact on the government's emergency response and justice systems, our public transit systems, real and perceived experiences of safety, and on the overall health of prairie cities' Downtown Cores.

⁶ Alberta Health Services. Interactive Health Data Application. July 5, 2023.

⁷ Public Health Agency of Canada. [Modelling projections for opioid-related deaths to December 2023](#)

⁸ Government of Alberta. [Alberta Opioid Surveillance Report: First Nations People in Alberta](#). December, 2021.

⁹ Government of Alberta. [Substance Use Surveillance Data](#)

¹⁰ Saskatoon Fire Department. June 6, 2023.

These challenges are also placing increasing demands on local policing and other protective services. Edmonton Police Service identified 3,277¹¹ required police responses in connection to non-criminal mental health issues so far this year. From January to May 2023, Saskatoon Police Service responded to 3,284 Social Disorder Calls and Calgary Police Services reported 2,830 Social Disorder Calls in their greater downtown. Saskatoon's Fire Department responded to 903 overdose incidents in 2022, and Edmonton's Fire Rescue Services responded to 6,552 overdose incidents in 2022. Across the prairie cities, people who are unhoused, have mental health or addiction issues or are otherwise marginalized often seek shelter in transit and transit-adjacent spaces due to a lack of (or perceived lack of) better options and often congregate in our downtown core which is creating increased challenges with supporting transit safety, security, increased ridership and downtown vibrancy.

Finally, Edmonton, Saskatoon and Regina have the highest number of parolees per capita of Canada's major cities.¹² Indigenous people are highly overrepresented in the criminal justice system. In Alberta, 56 percent of custodial admissions to adult corrections services were Indigenous in 2021/2022; Indigenous people make up 6.8 percent of the province's population. Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon and Edmonton all have Crime Severity Indexes well above the national average of 73.7 in 2021.¹³ Winnipeg experienced 13,449 violent crime incidents last year, of which 44.6% of incidents were between strangers, and 20.7% were committed by offenders in violation of their bail conditions, probation conditions or some other court order. There needs to be better support to ensure that individuals with complex mental health and substance use issues have an integrated release plan and the resources necessary to support their successful reintegration from government-run correctional and health facilities.

As we have demonstrated, prairie cities are at the frontlines of multiple complex social issues that are impacting our local economies, downtown cores and the well-being of our community members. We are ready and willing to work with Indigenous partners to address gaps and implement solutions at a local level, but we cannot address these challenges alone. While we appreciate the Federal government's investments to address these issues, we stress that it falls far too short to deal with the gravity and severity of intersecting issues that prairie cities face, leaving too many of our most vulnerable residents behind. We will also continue to work with and advocate to our provincial partners who also have a role to play in addressing these issues through the delivery of health and social services.

As prairie Mayors, we hope you will meet with us and see us as critical partners in implementing these solutions. There continues to be opportunity for improved coordination between Federal and Provincial supports to realize the full potential of the resources being dedicated. Cities have a proven track record of deploying federal funding much more quickly than waiting for flow through from Provinces (i.e. Rapid

¹¹ Edmonton Police Service. [Community Safety Data Portal](#)

¹² Edmonton Journal. ["Dumping ground": Edmonton has more former inmates per capita than any other big city in Canada, stats reveal."](#)

¹³ Statistics Canada. [Police-reported crime statistics in Canada, 2021.](#)

Housing Initiative). We are proposing a path forward that builds on local connections with First Nations and Indigenous partners, City administrative capacity and funding from multiple levels of government.

Sincerely,



Jyoti Gondek
Mayor, City of Calgary, Alberta



Charlie Clark
Mayor, City of Saskatoon,
Saskatchewan



Amarjeet Sohi
Mayor, City of Edmonton, Alberta



Scott Gillingham
Mayor, City of Winnipeg, Manitoba



Sandra Masters
Mayor, City of Regina, Saskatchewan

cc:

The Honourable Danielle Smith, Premier of Alberta
The Honourable Scott Moe, Premier of Saskatchewan
The Honorable Heather Stefanson, Premier of Manitoba