



British Columbia's
Office of the Human Rights
Commissioner

Human rights in Terrace

Community Brief | April 2024

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APRIL 2024

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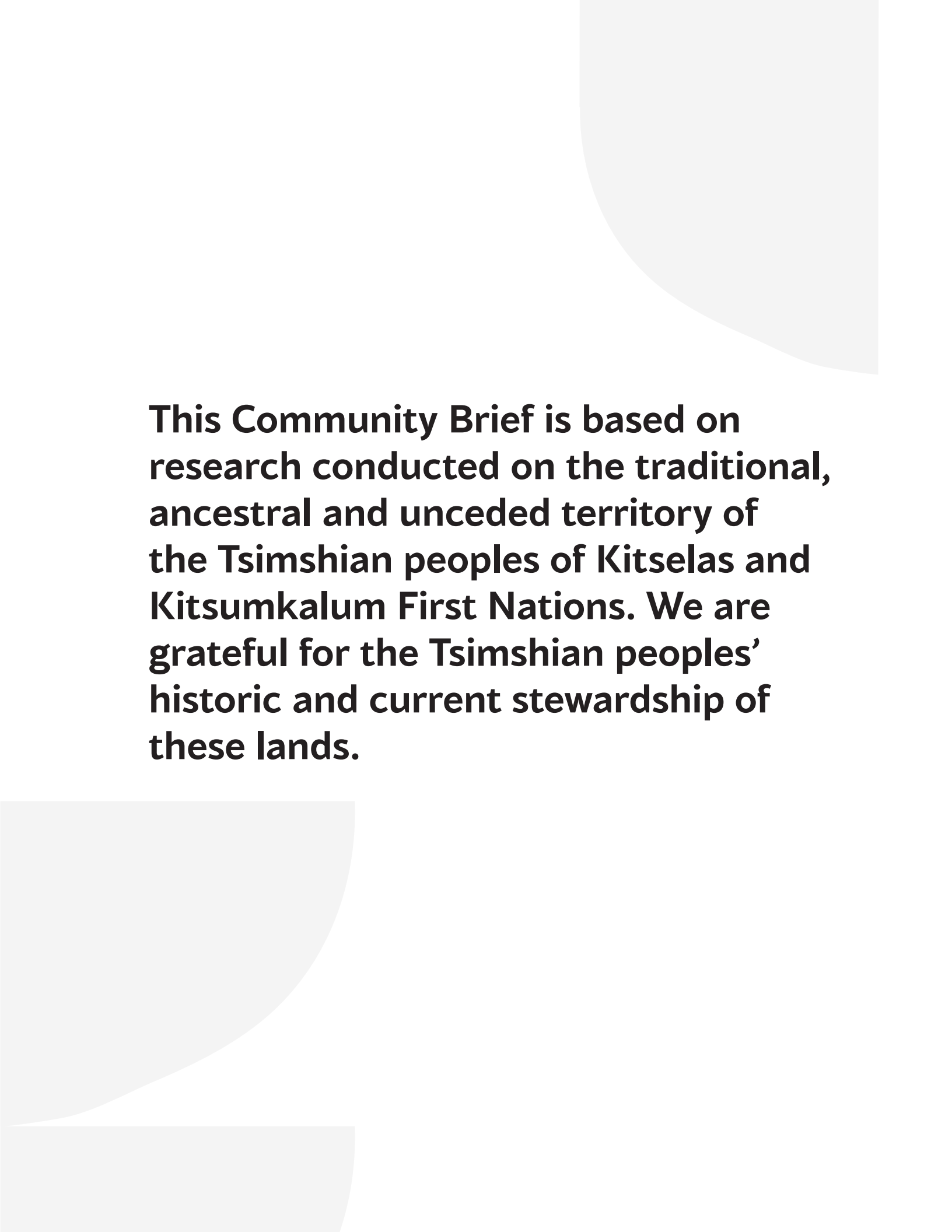
536 - 999 Canada Place

Vancouver, BC V6C 3E1

1-844-922-6472 | info@bchumanrights.ca



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**Office of the Human Rights
Commissioner**



This Community Brief is based on research conducted on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Tsimshian peoples of Kitselas and Kitsumkalum First Nations. We are grateful for the Tsimshian peoples' historic and current stewardship of these lands.

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If you are unsure about terminology used in this report, we invite you to visit our Human Rights Glossary at: bchumanrights.ca/glossary

Thank you

This work would not have been possible without the contributions of our Terrace Community Connectors: Terrace and District Community Social Services and the Terrace chapter of The Council of Canadians.

Who we are

B.C.'s Human Rights Commissioner is an independent officer of the Legislature. Under B.C.'s *Human Rights Code*, the Commissioner is responsible for promoting and protecting human rights in the province.

BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner (BCOHRC) envisions a province free from inequality, discrimination and injustice, where we uphold human rights for all and fulfil our responsibilities to one another. We strive to address the root causes of these issues by shifting laws, policies, practices and cultures. We do this work through education, research, advocacy, inquiry and monitoring.

Why we created this Community Brief

Soon after BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner was established in 2019, we began work on the Baseline Project, a multi-year project to map out the state of human rights in B.C. As part of the Baseline Project, we want to better understand human rights issues in different regions and in both urban and rural communities. To do this, we conducted in-depth research in several communities, including Terrace.

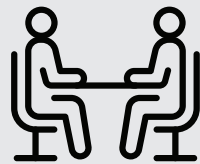
Each individual Community Brief tells the human rights story of a single community. Our Community Brief series offers a sample of the critical human rights issues affecting people in different parts of the province and explores how they manifest in unique ways in each community. The Community Briefs also celebrate community strengths and actions being taken to address inequality, discrimination and injustice in communities throughout B.C.

How we created this Community Brief

Between November 2022 and June 2023, BCOHRC and local community organizations acting as “Community Connectors” conducted eight focus groups and 10 interviews with approximately 47 individuals in Terrace, including service provider staff and people with lived experience of human rights issues.

This Community Brief reflects what we learned from all those who contributed to this project, supplemented with data from Statistics Canada, media sources and other relevant secondary sources. All quotations are from people who participated in the focus groups and interviews.

By necessity, this Community Brief is not comprehensive. We know there are human rights issues in Terrace that we were unable to learn about or include here and that much more could be said about each issue that is included. This Brief is offered as a snapshot intended to reflect several significant human rights issues in the community and to inspire action to address those issues.



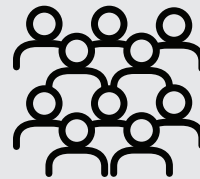
10

interviews



8

focus groups



47

participants

Community background

A short history of Terrace

The City of Terrace sits near the Skeena River in Northwestern B.C. on the unceded traditional Tsimshian territories of Kitsumkalum and Kitselas First Nations. Due to its natural abundance, this is one of the oldest continually occupied areas in what is now known as North America.¹

“The [Kitsum]kalum people, some went to the coast, but the majority of them stayed right in the valley, because it was self-sufficient in the valley. You could get your berries ... your wildlife and your goats.”

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, Indigenous peoples in B.C. experienced high rates of death from waves of epidemic disease brought by the settlers. Under the *Indian Act* of 1876, despite vehement opposition by both Kitsumkalum and Kitselas, Indigenous peoples were dispossessed of their lands and forced to live in reserves.^{2,3} At the same time, the 1904 *Homestead Act* granted free land along the Skeena River to any white settler, notably excluding those who were Indigenous or Chinese.⁴

Under the *Indian Act*, children from Kitselas and Kitsumkalum were forced to attend the Alberni, St. Michael's (Alert Bay), Port Simpson and Lejac residential schools.⁵ Potlaches, gift-giving feasts that are one of the most important cultural, economic and political practices of the Tsimshian peoples, were banned. These attempts to destroy Indigenous culture had deep intergenerational impacts which are still felt to this day. As we heard from one Indigenous participant:

“I don't know my language. I'm learning my culture now. I didn't know my culture prior because my grandmother more or less wouldn't teach it.... And, she didn't go to residential school, but those rules ... no potlaches and all that kind of stuff still existed.”

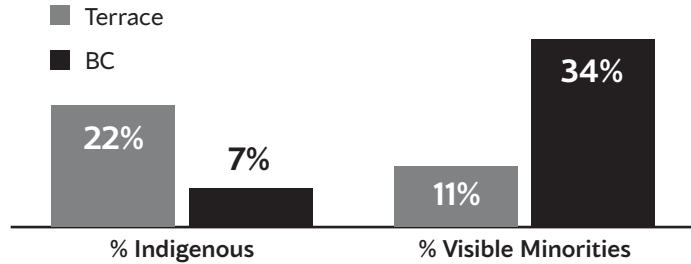
During the first half of the 20th century, the Skeena River area, in particular the neighbouring town of Port Essington, was home to a large Japanese Canadian population. During the Second World War, all residents of Japanese descent were forcibly displaced, with many interned in work camps in B.C.'s Interior.⁶

In the second half of the 20th century, the agricultural and forestry industries in the region drew many residents to Terrace, including a large Punjabi population.⁷ More recently, Terrace has become a major service hub for the entire Northwestern region of B.C.⁸ The Tsimshian peoples continue to assert their rights to these lands, including through modern treaty negotiations.

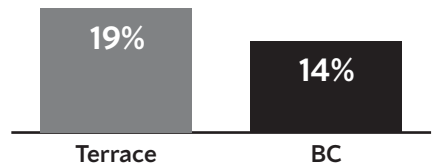
Snapshot of Terrace today⁹

The City of Terrace has a population of about

12,000
people.



The Greater Terrace area, which includes communities directly surrounding Terrace, has a population of about **19,000 people**.¹⁰



Terrace has a younger population than B.C. as a whole. In 2021, about 19 per cent of the population of Terrace was aged 0 to 14, compared with 14 per cent across B.C.

At the same time, Terrace is aging. Between 2001 and 2021, the number of adults aged 65 and older living in Terrace nearly doubled, which is similar to the provincial trend.



Terrace is a services hub for the region. The biggest industries by share of labour force are health and social assistance (18 per cent), retail (12 per cent), construction (10 per cent) and education (9 per cent).

Terrace has been shaped by major resource development projects in the region. This includes the LNG Canada liquefied natural gas export terminal, the Coastal Gaslink pipeline and the Rio Tinto aluminum smelter and hydropower facility. We heard concerns

from many participants about the environmental and social impacts of these resource projects.



“Even though we’re small and away from Victoria or from Vancouver ... these issues impact this community so much more greatly because of that.... I often feel that community members feel like they’re forgotten by the province.”

Colonization, racism and discrimination

Through our conversations in Terrace, we heard that racism and discrimination against Indigenous peoples and newcomers are major human rights challenges in the community. Discrimination and hate not only directly harm the person experiencing them. By preventing people from accessing basic services to which they are entitled, discrimination creates systemic disparities and inequities.

Colonization and anti-Indigenous racism

The legacy of colonization has had a profound impact on the human rights of Indigenous peoples. We heard from many participants that present-day anti-Indigenous racism remains a major human rights issue in Terrace.

For example, one Indigenous participant described how a prevalent form of racism in Terrace is the view that Indigenous people “belong” on reserves, and that their needs are solely the responsibility of First Nation governments, even when they live in the city.

Several Indigenous individuals living in the Terrace area shared their experiences of discrimination and exclusion in many aspects of life, including in health care settings, when visiting stores and when looking for work. For example, one participant shared concerns that major industries do not hire many Indigenous people or hire them only to do menial work to “check a box” on Indigenous participation.

“It’s so sad because I have three children who are blonde, fair skinned, and I have three children who are dark skinned and look like their mom. I’m more worried about my children who are dark skinned.”

In 2021, the first and only Indigenous city councillor in Terrace, Jessica McCallum Miller (Hlox-Majagalee), resigned from council and filed a human rights complaint against the City, citing experiences of systemic racism and sexism from other council members.¹¹ In fall 2023, Hlox-Majagalee and the mayor of Terrace issued a joint statement in which the City formally apologized for the systemic racism that led to her resignation and affirmed its commitment to reinstate community-to-community forums with Kitselas and Kitsumkalum, as well as to require City staff and elected officials to participate in anti-racism and localized cultural awareness training.¹²

WHAT HELPS: Reclaiming Indigenous rights

Kitsumkalum and Kitselas are currently in final stage of modern treaty negotiations. However, we also heard that the amount of land covered by the treaty is only a small part of their traditional territories. We heard that there will still be the need for continued First Nations involvement in decision-making over the remainder of their traditional homelands, including to ensure continued access to traditional foods. One participant shared how hunting, harvesting and food preparation are key to sharing culture between generations.

“I remember being at the smokehouse and my grandmother telling me stories, or my grandfather telling me stories when we were out hunting.... To me, it’s when you’re out on the river, waiting for the net to fill up, stories being passed. That’s a vital link ... between the youth and the elders in order to keep our culture going.”

We heard that in recent years there has been greater collaboration between the local City of Terrace government and Kitsumkalum and Kitselas. We also heard that there has been progress toward more meaningful representation of Indigenous peoples among and within service providers in Terrace. Indigenous service providers shared how they have pushed back against tokenism: to not only be at the table, but to be heard and have ideas implemented.

“When I started here 22 years ago, I’d be asked to go to a meeting, and they would have this big discussion and they would say ... we had First Nations input.... [I realized] they’re just using us.... That’s when I found my voice. I started challenging their thinking.”

Newcomers in Terrace

The Skeena River area has a long history of immigration. Over the past five years, Terrace has seen a significant increase in the number of international students, through UNBC and Coast Mountain College, and temporary foreign workers. According to Statistics Canada, in 2021, there were 1,140 immigrants, including 150 recent immigrants and 405 non-permanent residents living in Terrace.



1,140 immigrants, including **150** recent immigrants and **405** non-permanent residents living in Terrace.

We heard that many newcomers to Terrace experience human rights violations by their employers. We heard that temporary foreign workers are most vulnerable to these human rights violations because their work permits are tied to specific employers. However, exploitation by employers is also experienced by many international students and other newcomers.

“Sometimes people live at the hotel [where they work] ... so they only leave when they go shopping and they usually go with a co-worker who has a car. I worked with one woman and for eight months she didn’t know really what the town looked like because she would go from her room to her job and back.”

We heard that some employers promise to help newcomers with immigration processes, such as renewing work permits or applying for permanent residency. This allows the employer to control communication with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. In these circumstances, we heard that the employer or their agent will tell the newcomer they must pay large sums of money for different steps of the immigration process. Similarly, we heard some employers in Terrace charge their temporary foreign workers for the cost of the labour market impact assessment required to hire them, even though this is illegal. We heard that mechanisms of accountability are limited. A temporary foreign worker may worry that making a complaint will place them at risk of losing their work, their housing and their ability to stay in Canada. We heard that newcomers are often unaware that settlement service providers, such as Skeena Diversity Society, can provide free information and support for individuals navigating immigration processes in Terrace.

Securing affordable housing is a challenge for many newcomers. We heard that international students and newcomers face additional barriers to finding housing, including lack of local references, barriers to setting up Canadian bank accounts and discrimination by landlords. These barriers can make newcomers vulnerable to exploitation. For example, we heard that in some cases, newcomers have employers who also offer to rent them accommodations. We heard about cases where newcomers, even on open work permits, have signed contracts stating they will lose their housing if they leave their jobs.

“On their [lease] it said even though [you] have [an] open work permit, if you get a second job ... you have to leave within forty-eight hours. If you get fired, you have to leave within twenty-four hours.”

In addition, we heard from many participants that visible minorities in Terrace frequently experience racism and discrimination from other community members.

“People in Terrace are actually very open ... and welcoming. But there are people that are fearful, racist and struggling and ... say, ‘how come you’re helping the Syrians or the Ukrainians, and not helping us?’”

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence is a significant human rights issue across B.C., including in Terrace. We heard how discriminatory attitudes towards women and gender-diverse people, along with gaps in essential services, increase the risk of violence and hinder effective response and support for those who have experienced violence.

We heard serious concerns about an increase in gender-based violence associated with the resource sector. These concerns are consistent with findings of the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls that resource extraction projects have been linked to violence against Indigenous women in communities across Canada.

“Tuesday is the camp turnaround day, so you’ll see the huge jets flying over, the restaurants are really busy.... A lot of my female friends will not go to certain places on a Tuesday because the workmen are in town and they don’t feel safe anymore.”

Terrace is along the Highway of Tears, where many Indigenous and non-Indigenous women have gone missing or been murdered. There are persistent issues around safe transportation between Terrace and other communities, especially since the Greyhound bus routes on the Highway of Tears were cancelled in 2018.

There are essential supports in the community for people experiencing gender-based violence, with more supports coming soon (such as the new second-stage housing development set to open early 2024). However, we heard that systemic issues, including lack of housing, lack of safe transportation, staffing challenges in social services and tensions with law enforcement, make it difficult to help women and gender-diverse people who have experienced violence to get to safety.

“They don’t have a place to go.... The shelters are full, so they get turned away even if they are fleeing abuse and ... there is no transit for them to get home to family.”

We heard that Indigenous women are at heightened risk of violence, and often face discrimination from health care providers and law enforcement when trying to get help.

“[Indigenous women] have gone through perhaps years of trauma, both in our families and societally, and have witnessed police brutality against our family members ... [If] we are sexually assaulted or abused ... we feel very scared to be cared for medically, very afraid to call police as sometimes police have been the perpetrators of said abuse.... It’s very hard for us to seek assistance when we do not have a level of trust ... that our bodies will not be put in any more harm and that our rights will be upheld.”

WHAT HELPS: 'Ksan Society's Sexual Assault Response Program

We heard about the importance of community-based services that use a person-centred and trauma-informed approach in responding to gender-based violence.

For example, 'Ksan has a support person who can accompany people who have experienced sexual assault to health care settings and the RCMP, to support and advocate for them. Another major initiative through the Sexual Assault Response Program has been around community ownership of sexual assault kits. 'Ksan now owns a freezer for sexual assault kits, housed at the hospital. According to protocol, when someone comes to the hospital after a sexual assault, the hospital will call 'Ksan who will send a staff person to support the individual who was assaulted and make sure they know what choices they have afterwards (for example, whether to use the kit, whether to report to police).

“It’s really about empowering a survivor and giving that control and that power back to them to help them feel safe after a very traumatic experience.”

Housing and poverty

Poverty

According to Statistics Canada’s Market Basket Measure of poverty, in 2020, seven per cent of Terrace residents lived in poverty, which is slightly lower than the provincial rate of 10 per cent.¹³ We heard how the rising cost of living is making it harder for many people to maintain an adequate standard of living. We heard many times from participants that the fulfillment of basic human rights often comes down to money.

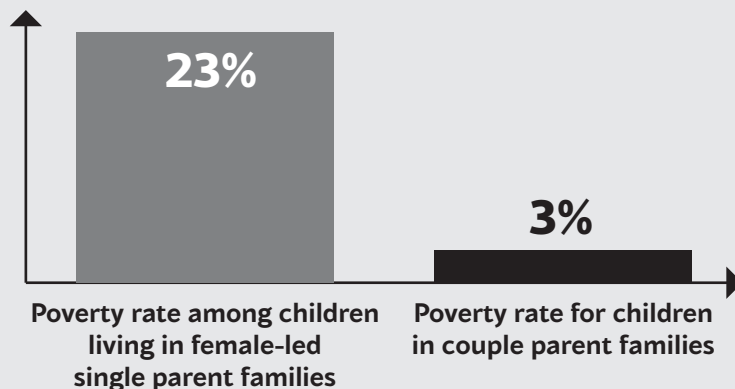
“Different kinds of medical care are expensive, even though they are necessary. Food is expensive, even though it’s necessary. Housing. Really all these basic things that someone needs to survive are expensive despite being necessities.”

We heard from many participants that the cost of food and secure access to food in the North are both important human rights concerns. The Terrace Food Bank shared that, during the first half of 2023, they served about 600 families and 112 new applicants, compared with 20 to 30 new applicants during comparable timeframes in previous years. These numbers do not fully capture the number of people in the community experiencing food insecurity, as the Terrace Food Bank is not the only food program in Terrace.

“A lot of us aren’t eating enough ... because when it comes down to money, the first thing you’re going to pay is your bills before you’re going to feed yourself.”

Some demographic groups in Terrace are disproportionately impacted by poverty. For instance, the poverty rate for Indigenous people in Terrace is nearly double that of non-Indigenous people.¹⁴ In 2020, the poverty rate among children living in female-led single-parent families was 23 per cent, while the poverty rate for children in couple-parent families was three per cent.¹⁵

The poverty rate for Indigenous people in Terrace is nearly **double** that of non-Indigenous people.



WHAT HELPS: 'Ksan Society's Donation Room

'Ksan Society runs the Donation Room, which has high-quality items donated by community members and local businesses. It is free to anyone in the community but is used regularly by 'Ksan Society clients and by clients of other community programs. We heard the Donation Room allows individuals to come in and take what they need, which helps give people a sense of autonomy and dignity.

Housing

We heard from virtually all participants that housing is a major human rights issue in Terrace.

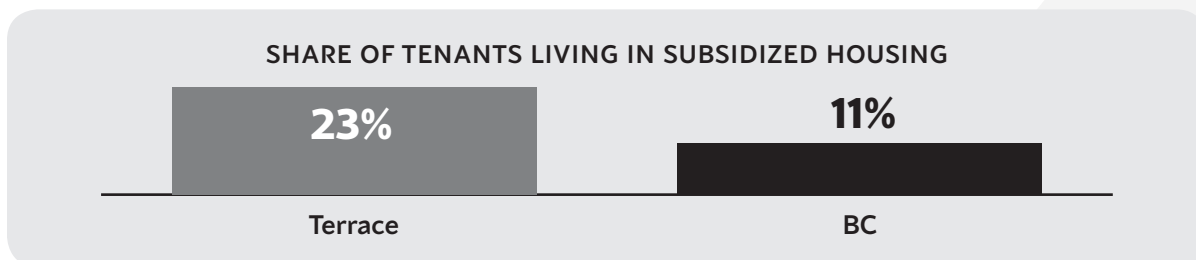
According to the 2020 Greater Terrace Housing Needs Report, the supply of housing in Terrace has not kept up with the needs of the growing and aging population of Terrace.¹⁶ Additionally, we heard from many participants that the influx of workers for the major resource industry projects in the area may be placing additional pressure on the local housing supply.

In 2020, median dwelling prices in Terrace were 45 per cent higher than in 2010, adjusted for inflation.¹⁷ Renters face low vacancy rates and soaring rental costs. In 2020, one in four tenants in Terrace were spending 30 per cent of their income or more on housing. We heard that many people are precariously housed, with lower-income tenants unable to keep up with rent or targeted for eviction by landlords.



“We have a lot of [older adults] who are in rental accommodations who are struggling to make their payments each month ... [who are] cutting down on food or medications and things like that.”

Terrace has a relatively high share of tenants living in subsidized housing, including those receiving rental supplements for market rentals (23 per cent of tenants are in subsidized housing compared to 11 per cent across B.C.). However, there is still high unmet need for affordable housing. For instance, in October 2020, 'Ksan Housing Society's waitlist for housing had 675 applicants.¹⁸



The housing crisis also disproportionately impacts women and children fleeing violence. For instance, we heard that most women who stay at the transition house need to stay beyond the 30-day guideline because of the lack of safe and affordable housing in Terrace.

We heard many times that Indigenous people, people with disabilities and women with multiple children experience discrimination in the housing market.

“As soon as landlords know that this is an Indigenous woman with multiple children and she’s getting financial support, they’re not going to engage.”

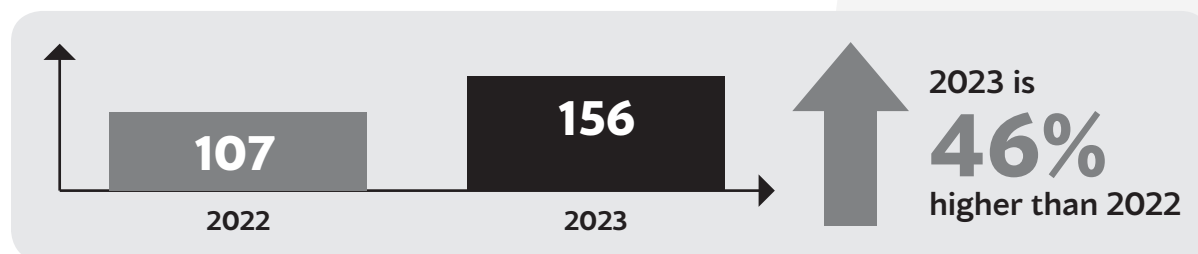
CASE STUDY: Coachman Apartments

Many people do not want to speak to their landlord about substandard living conditions for fear of losing their housing. For example, many participants spoke to us about Coachman Apartments, a privately owned 25-unit rental building that received media attention in late 2022 after its water pipes froze and burst. We heard that the Coachman Apartments had a severe mold problem even before the pipes burst, and many rooms were in disrepair.¹⁹ After the pipes burst, residents were advised to vacate the building.

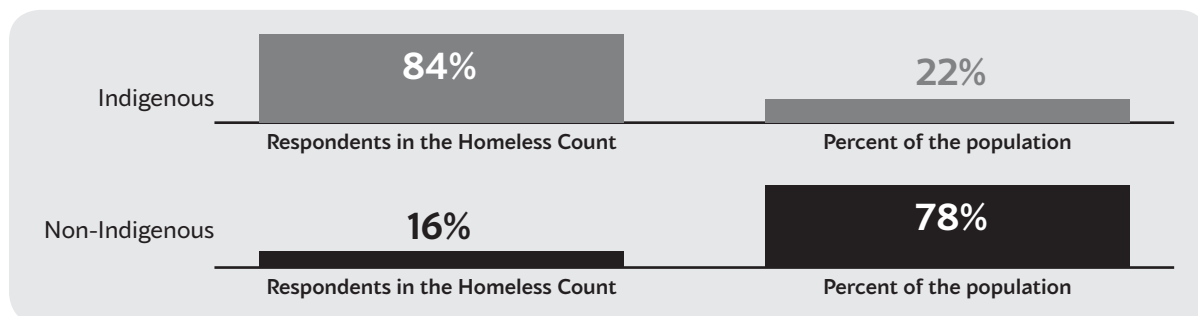
While most residents evacuated the building at this time, others chose to stay despite risks to their health, because of barriers to accessing housing elsewhere.²⁰ Among residents who did vacate, many were living in hotel rooms for months, unable to find alternate housing.²¹ In late April 2023, BC Housing bought a former motel property and converted it into housing for displaced tenants and others in the community.²²

Being unhoused in Terrace

Terrace has a large unhoused population, especially relative to its size. The 2023 Terrace Homeless Count identified 156 people experiencing homelessness in Terrace, up from 107 in 2022.²³ However, this is a known undercount. For instance, there are many people experiencing homelessness living in the woods near Terrace not captured in the Homeless Count.²⁴ We heard that many people in Terrace also live in hidden homelessness, sleeping on couches or floors, and many more are close to homelessness due to the high cost of living and precarious housing.



According to the 2023 Homeless Count, 84 per cent of all people experiencing homelessness in Terrace are Indigenous, while making up only 22 per cent of the general population.²⁵ This disparity reflects the legacy of colonization, inter-generational trauma and discrimination faced by Indigenous peoples. Among Indigenous Homeless Count respondents, four out of five had lived or generational experience with residential schools.



While there are shelters available in Terrace, we heard that these shelters fall short of meeting the need for emergency housing, partly due to staffing issues that affect their operations. In December 2022, Dickie Nelson, a 54-year-old Tsimshian-Nisga’a man from Kitsumkalum First Nation, froze to death in a tent in a homeless encampment in Terrace.²⁶ According to reporting by the CBC, there was a shelter bed available for him that night, but he had gone out to search for someone else who was not at the shelter and died outdoors in -22 C weather.

We also heard that discrimination against people who are on the streets is highly prevalent.

“I have witnessed RCMP ... doctors and nurses ... government officials mistreat people on the streets and at-risk peoples.... Police brutality continues. There’s a lack of adequate medical care for those who are homeless and there’s a lack of acceptance from many local officials here that homeless people have the right to be treated as people, as any other citizen, as fairly as they can be treated.”

WHAT HELPS: Gitlaxdax Nisga’a Terrace Society’s Peer Outreach Program

We heard that Nisga’a First Nation, which neighbours Terrace, offers peer-based outreach work to unhoused Indigenous individuals in the area through Gitlaxdax Nisga’a Terrace Society. We heard from multiple participants that this peer-based, Indigenous outreach program has made a significant impact on the community.

“The peer supports have been a game changer ... [for] the street-involved population. ... They’ve been incredibly successful at getting people into treatment programs, connected to harm reduction services, into mental health support services.... Their impact has been phenomenal in a very short time.”

An under-resourced hub: Gaps and barriers in essential services

With only 12,000 residents, Terrace is a small municipality, yet it is a hub for the entire Northwestern region of B.C. This means that while Terrace has some services that other communities in the region do not have, it also experiences the challenge of meeting the needs of the region, including the population pressures associated with major resource development projects.

We heard that the health, education and social service sectors are all experiencing major staffing challenges. Barriers to services persist such as transportation, systems navigation, lack of trauma-informed care and discrimination.

Staffing challenges

The health, education and social service sectors are the biggest employers in Terrace. However, we heard that these sectors all have acute staff shortages. There are many essential services in the community that are not able to operate at full capacity due to understaffing. For example, we heard that sometimes the shelters must close for the day because of a lack of staff. We heard there are challenges in recruiting and retaining educators, and that the schools rely on one-year contracts to fill gaps.

We heard that understaffing means higher workloads and stress for staff, which can contribute to staff burnout. This can create a vicious cycle where staff burn out and leave, making the understaffing problem worse. Another secondary effect of staffing challenges is that when new positions are created, it typically leaves another position vacant since there is a limited number of people qualified to fill those positions.

We heard there are barriers for local people who may otherwise be interested in training to fill those staffing needs. We heard that wages in the social services sector are low, especially given the high cost of living in Terrace. Some youth spoke about how the rising cost of living makes it more challenging to pursue post-secondary education. We heard that people with disabilities or diverse learning needs often do not get the support or accommodations they need in post-secondary education.

“You can’t get by on one job, so you’re going to be doing multiple jobs and school, which can be intense for some young people. It’s hard to achieve your goals when there’s so much money that plays into it.”

We heard the need for more support to help local people fill staffing needs in the community.

“You have to find someone that’s home grown, that loves it [here] and then nurture them ... provide them opportunities that are right here and we can do it now.”

WHAT HELPS: The Garage

In fall 2021, a local couple bought a space that would become known as the Garage.

Over the past two years, the Garage has become an important community hub. The Terrace Food Bank operates there and distributes food once a week. Every Thursday, outreach workers from 10 to 12 agencies come to the Garage. The Salvation Army sets up a mobile food truck and community members come to eat and meet with the outreach workers. The Garage is also home to a substance user peer network, mental health and addiction support groups run by Northern Health and a winter warming space coordinated with the City of Terrace.

We heard from multiple community organizations that it is helpful to have a neutral, non-institutional space where agencies can meet clients and each other. The space has become important for outreach workers as well as clients, giving them a space where they can collaborate and support each other.

Barriers to services

We heard many times about barriers to services, some of which are common to many communities, and others which are especially pronounced in Terrace. These barriers mean that some services, programs and benefits that are available for community members are difficult or unsafe to access.

“I would suggest that as robust as our programs sound and as low barrier as we try to make them ... there are these little tiny gaps in service and it just makes the whole thing inaccessible.”

We heard that navigating systems can be difficult, especially for people experiencing complex and stressful situations or complex trauma where they need support. For example, we heard that service providers do not always use a trauma-informed approach.

“You can’t expect people that aren’t doing well, that have complicated situations to fit into a colonial system where you must find this person and you must do this specific intake and this intake has to be done at this specific time and then you’ve got to wait two to three weeks to get the appointment. Then you have to show up on a Thursday at 2 and if you miss that appointment well too bad.”

We also heard that the Canadian National Railway that cuts across town poses a unique transportation barrier in Terrace. Many people with lower incomes live on the south side of the community, but most services are located on the north side. Crossing the railway line directly is dangerous, with multiple severe injuries and fatalities occurring over the years.²⁷ However, there is only one overpass and limited public transportation to help people cross Terrace from north to south.

WHAT HELPS: Bus passes for school

Terrace's middle and secondary schools are all located on the north side of the community. We heard the geographic split in Terrace caused by the railway line was making it difficult for students living on the south side to go to school, especially in the winter. In response, the City of Terrace and the School District partnered to provide free bus passes for junior high and high school students living on the south side. This initiative has had positive reception from families and students.

Health

Terrace has a regional hospital with health services that other communities in the Northwestern region of B.C. do not have. However, we heard from many participants that challenges in recruiting and retaining health care professionals are drastically limiting access to health care in the community. For example, we heard there are not enough family doctors in Terrace. The lack of continuous primary care has a disproportionate impact on seniors, individuals struggling with mental health or substance use challenges, individuals with a history of trauma and people with disabilities.

“How do you address the roots of the problem and how do you get the same level of service and care when you see a different provider every time? How’s that fair?”

While expanded access to telehealth since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic has helped mitigate some of the impacts of this gap in primary care, some of those who are disproportionately impacted by the lack of primary care physicians face additional barriers to alternatives like telehealth. For example, we heard concerns about seniors who may not have the digital literacy to book telehealth appointments, about people with living situations that do not allow for confidentiality and privacy and general challenges with internet connectivity in the North, even in a hub community like Terrace.

Lacking primary care places additional strain on emergency care, which is also facing staffing constraints.

“We’re getting called in to somebody who’s in crisis because they haven’t taken their medications for four months because their prescription ran out. Or the wound has become infected ... We’re ending up dealing with far more acute cases because people just haven’t been able to get access in a timely fashion.”

Terrace has a new regional hospital opening in 2025. We heard from some service providers that the expanded range of health services that will be offered makes this “an incredible moment for the Northwest.” However, we also heard repeated concerns about how the new hospital will be staffed given the existing recruitment and retention challenges in the community. Several participants noted that there is a lack of mental health care available in Terrace relative to the level of need in the community.

Discrimination in health care

We heard that for many Indigenous individuals, as well as for people who are unhoused, use substances and/or experience mental health issues, discrimination in health settings is prevalent and limits access to the health services that are available in the community.

For instance, we heard Indigenous people are frequently dismissed or stereotyped as “just seeking pills” when trying to access necessary care. For example, service providers shared the story of a client who was run over by a car, went to the emergency room, waited for eight hours and then left. Outreach workers brought her back the next day. The hospital staff gave her suboxone, a medication used to treat opioid addiction, instead of painkillers. When they finally ran X-rays, they found the woman had a fractured pelvis.

Service providers shared another story about a client who was sexually assaulted and went to the hospital saying that she was suicidal and homicidal (wanting to kill her abusers).

“They kept her overnight on the floor.... They didn’t even really go see her when we went in.... She was begging and crying out for help and they’re just like, ‘Oh, you again.’”

Service providers described how these extreme incidents emerge in the context of a culture where discriminatory comments about patients are regularly heard in hospital hallways and waiting rooms.

“Things I’ve overheard at the hospital.... ‘Oh, it’s his third time in here OD’ing this week. I wish they’d just ship ‘em away.’”

WHAT HELPS: Advocates for Indigenous patients

We heard from service providers that trauma-informed practice is incorporated in training for nurses and other health care workers more often now and that this has resulted in some improvement in how people are treated. We also heard it has been very helpful to have Kermode Friendship Society staff and Aboriginal Patient Liaisons at the hospital to accompany patients and advocate for them. The new hospital also has an Indigenous advisory board.

Services for older adults

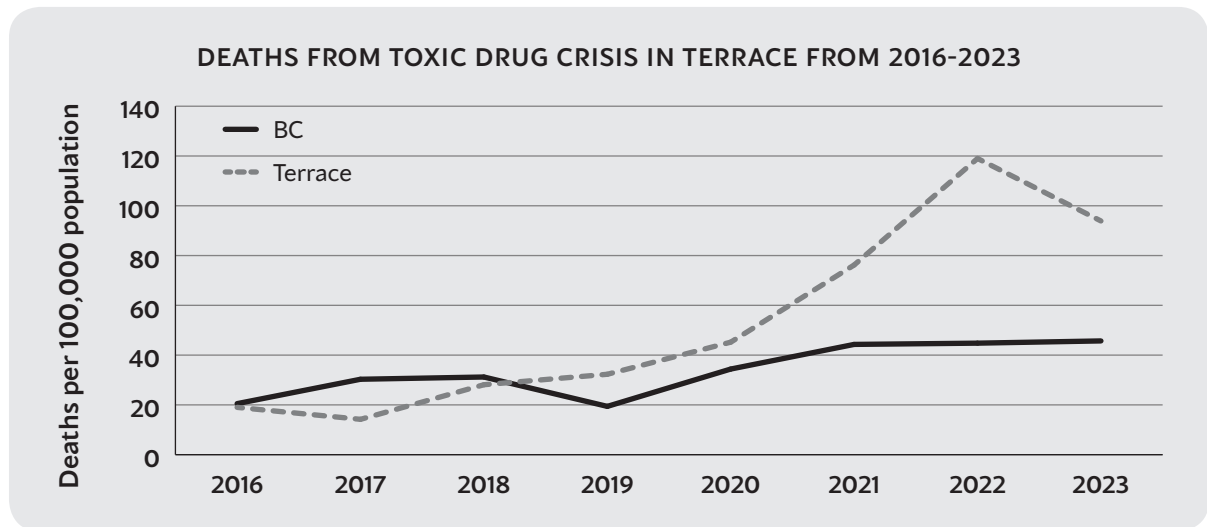
We heard about the challenges faced by older adults in Terrace. While Terrace has a young population overall, the share of older people has increased significantly over time and services have not kept pace.

For example, there is one assisted living facility in Terrace with a waitlist of about three to five years and one long-term care facility with a wait list of two to three years. We heard that these gaps have cascading effects, ultimately putting strain on the health system and leaving many seniors in crisis.

“We have a lot of seniors [in] their 80s and 90s living in their homes because there is nowhere to go until they are in such poor health that they end up in the hospital, which only has so many beds.”

Toxic drug crisis

In 2022, Terrace had the second highest unregulated drug fatality rate in B.C., second only to Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. As shown in the figure below, over the past four years, the number of people dying from unregulated drugs in Terrace increased rapidly, far beyond the provincial rate. As of October 2023, the annualized death rate per 100,000 people has decreased to 98.7, though this is still more than double the provincial rate of 45.7. From 2015 to 2023, 92 people in Terrace died from the toxic drug supply.



Source: BCCDC Drug Poisoning Emergency Dashboard

We heard that access to harm reduction, detox and treatment is limited in Terrace. In 2022, following strong community advocacy, Northern Health established an overdose prevention site in Terrace. Staffing capacity remains a challenge, with the site only open Monday to Friday from noon to 4 p.m., excluding holidays.²⁸ In June 2022, Terrace also received a new drug checking machine.²⁹

We heard that sometimes people assume the expansion of mental health and substance use services in Terrace is not working because there remains a large unhoused population and a toxic drug crisis. As one participant explained, however, harm reduction services are preventing a bad situation from being much worse:

“They’re expanding the mental health and harm reduction services in Terrace because we continue to have a high rate of high overdose and fatality rate.... I can’t imagine had we not had those services where we would be at right now.... It’s really helped us from not being in a much worse situation.”

We also heard that discrimination against substance users is prevalent and has prevented and delayed much-needed harm reduction and treatment programs. For example, we heard that there was considerable resistance to establishing an opioid agonist therapy clinic in Terrace, from both the public and some physicians.

Access to detox and treatment remains a significant human rights challenge in the community. We heard there are only two detox beds available in Terrace, often available for very short periods of time. As participants shared, when substance users go through the withdrawal process without adequate medical care, they are extremely vulnerable and at risk of dying.

“We don’t have detox beds or sobering beds. Apparently, there’s two in the hospital but, if they’re utilized for something else, they’re not available ... and they never seem to be available. So our detoxing takes place typically in the RCMP station, which is not a healthy spot to go through withdrawal.”

Since 2021, Northern First Nations Alliance has been working on creating a healing and treatment centre in Terrace, including medical detox.³⁰ In October 2023, the B.C. government announced that the Northwest Working Group, comprising Northern First Nations Alliance, Northern Health and the B.C. government, is developing culturally safe addiction supports in Terrace, including detox services.³¹

There is also planned expansion of mental health and substance use services including three new supportive recovery beds and a complex care program at the Sonder House supportive housing facility for individuals experiencing both mental health and substance use challenges.^{32,33}

These new locally available services are critically important. We heard from many participants that because detox and addiction treatment have not been available locally, people often travel from Terrace to Vancouver or Prince George to access these services. We heard from several participants that people who attempt the eight- to 10-hour bus journey to Prince George or the 16-hour bus ride to Vancouver often do not make it there, instead getting off the bus along the way to use substances at a time when they may be at their most physically and emotionally vulnerable. In addition, Prince George has a limited number of beds available to service all of Northern B.C., which means people face long wait times to access detox.

“[They’re] on the bus for a 16-hour bus ride, by themselves, suffering from mental health and addictions.... They don’t make it. They go missing.”

We also heard that even valuable programs and supports can only do so much when fundamental rights like access to housing or medical addictions treatment go unmet.

“Outreach is palliative care. We’re just making them comfortable until they die. You know, we give them some clean socks ... a tent, a tarp ... until those basic human rights are able to be met, like housing and proper medical care, which is detox, which is treatment ... we’re just making them comfortable.”

WHAT HELPS: The power of ceremony

We heard from Indigenous participants in Terrace about the power of ceremony. We heard that for people who are suffering from mental health or addiction challenges, ceremony is an opportunity for healing. For the broader community, ceremony is a way to connect beyond the limitations of institution and social status, and to really understand one another.

“You aren’t your position, you aren’t your status, you aren’t how much money you have. Everyone has stuff that they [need to] work through ... when you’re sitting shoulder to shoulder in that sweat, and you’re healing together.”

We heard that ceremony builds respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in a way that fosters healing and reconciliation.

“[It] comes down to listening to the peoples of each of their territories respectively, not in paid meetings, but in ceremony.... It really does bring that eye-to-eye level respect between people and that understanding that yes, we are different, but it is a beautiful thing to understand that we live together and we can embrace one another’s differences.”

Education

We heard from participants in Terrace about human rights issues in the education system, including unequal treatment of Indigenous students, students with disabilities and LGBTQ2SAI+ students.

The City of Terrace has 11 public and four private schools in the K–12 system. Through this research, we heard most about student experiences at the two public secondary schools: Caledonia Secondary (Grades 10–12) and Parkside Secondary (Grades 7–12). In 2022/23, Caledonia had 550 students, 36 per cent of whom were Indigenous and 19 per cent with diverse needs.³⁴ Parkside, which is an alternate school, had 97 students, 72 per cent of whom were Indigenous and 40 per cent with diverse needs.³⁵

We heard that Parkside alternate school is an important community asset. Youth, including those with disabilities and those who are trans or gender-diverse, offered multiple accounts of having better experiences at Parkside than Caledonia, including feeling safer from bullying and harassment. However, some students from Parkside described feeling socially separated from other youth, including experiences of stigma and discrimination based on their attendance at an alternate school.

“I’ve even had people message me trying to get to know me and they go, ‘Oh, what school do you go to?’ And I say Parkside, and they just flat out block me, never talk to me again.”

We heard that anti-Indigenous racism is prevalent in the school system. We heard that Indigenous students are sometimes labelled as having a disability, needing medication or speaking English as a second language when that is not the case. On the other hand, one service provider told us they see many Indigenous children who are neurodiverse and undiagnosed, getting no supports. We also heard that many Indigenous students experience bullying from other students.

“[My son] now accepts who he is, but growing up he didn’t. Like when I was putting him into [middle school] he said, ‘Mom, I do not want you to register me as I’m status.’ ... I was really offended and upset with him, but it’s part of the friends that he had ... they put down First Nations people.”

Many participants shared examples of children and youth with disabilities facing inequitable treatment in the school system, including not receiving accommodations and supports, as well as disrespectful treatment by some school staff.

“[Middle school] was definitely very difficult for a lot of students who had disabilities, even [some staff] were pretty rude to students with autism or just some sort of disability.”

We also heard challenges experienced by LGBTQ2SAI+ children and youth, particularly in the context of a smaller community where it can be harder to find and connect with other people who are LGBTQ2SAI+.

WHAT HELPS: ‘Na Aksa Gyilak’yoo School

We heard that the ‘Na Aksa Gyilak’yoo School in Kitsumkalum has played a major role in supporting Indigenous students. The school integrates Indigenous culture and responds to what is happening in the community. For example, we heard that when an Elder passes away, the school shuts down to acknowledge the community is grieving.

“Some of the kids that I had taught in public school had switched over to [‘Na Aksa Gyilak’yoo] School and I saw a huge difference in those kids being more engaged and I think it was because they had cultural support there.”

We heard that ‘Na Aksa Gyilak’yoo School has also played a key role in revitalizing language and culture for Kitsumkalum and Kitselas. As one participant shared:

“The younger generation now speaks the language a lot better than what I’ve heard, right?... And with that comes cultural teachings and everything else.”

Services for children and youth with disabilities

Participants spoke of major barriers in health care and education for children and youth with disabilities.

Insufficient health care resources and the resulting long waitlists for assessment, diagnosis and specialist services mean that many children do not receive the interventions and supports they need. These gaps can be particularly critical when children miss out on early interventions, before the age of five, because of multi-year waitlists for assessment. Travelling to Vancouver and paying out-of-pocket for specialist services is out of reach for most families, especially for those who may have multiple barriers.

Other services for children and youth with disabilities, such as the Family Connections Centre and the Integrated Child and Youth Team are also impacted by staffing challenges.

Participants shared that when children and youth with disabilities or different learning needs do not receive the supports they need, they are unable to meaningfully access education. We also heard that many youth fall between the cracks when they age out of receiving supports through the Ministry of Children and Family Development’s Child and Youth with Support Needs Services and through the School District. We heard that many young adults with disabilities are eligible for supports through Community Living BC, but do not know they can access those supports because of a lack of coordination and information sharing in a way that is accessible to all people with disabilities.

Conclusion

As in other communities in B.C., many people living in Terrace are experiencing significant human rights challenges. These challenges have been shaped by the history of colonization on these lands, as well as by Terrace's position as an under-resourced hub for the entire Northwestern region of B.C.

Through conversations with community members, we heard many examples of leadership by Kitsumkalum and Kitselas First Nations, as well as critical service provision and advocacy work by community organizations and local government to help address these human rights challenges. Many people living in Terrace are working toward a more equitable future for their community. We hope this Community Brief contributes to those efforts.

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British Columbia's
**Office of the Human Rights
Commissioner**

536 – 999 Canada Place
Vancouver, BC V6C 3E1
1-844-922-6472 | info@bchumanrights.ca

 bchumanrights.ca

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