



Native Montréal

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## Public Consultation on Systemic Racism and Discrimination in Montreal

Native Montreal Youth Council speak out!

***Native Montreal** is a service center founded by Indigenous people for Indigenous people. It offers over a dozen programs and services for Indigenous people living in the Greater Montreal area. The Native Montreal Youth Council is a self-directed group that provides young people with an opportunity to focus on issues important to them while making an impact on the lives of other urban indigenous youth.*

***Equitas – International Center for Human Rights Education** advances equality, social justice and respect for human dignity through transformative education programs. In Canada, we focus on capacity-building with multi-stakeholder partner organizations to strengthen their ability to collaborate and offer programs/opportunities for diverse youth to be actively engaged in their communities promoting respect for human rights. Working closely with partner organizations, we build youth leadership, enabling diverse youth to be changemakers in shaping their communities into more vibrant, resilient and inclusive places to be.*

**Co-facilitated by:** Meropi Deligiannis (Native Montreal) and Ruth Morrison (Equitas)

**Date:** July 30, 2019

**Participants:** 4 members of the Native Montreal Youth Council: Simon (21), Leah (17), Johnny (21), and Amanda (28)

**Duration:** 3 hours

### **What are we talking about?**

We talked about discrimination and racism and how it is inextricably intertwined with other issues such as classism, bullying, homophobia, and ableism. More specifically, we focused on the cycle of poverty, homelessness, mental illness, profiling, social exclusion, discrimination in the medical system, politicians validating problematic and racist language, and government regulated identity (Indian status). We also discussed a lack of responsiveness from the police, and overall a lack of trust in them to help reduce issues in communities, and lack of education about indigenous people in schools and communities.

Other situations that were mentioned were discrimination for speaking English and not French (with the STM, job search, social situations, etc), and constantly being confused for a different race. When facing multiple of the above-mentioned issues, it makes dealing with any and all of these issues even harder and more complicated. This is therefore why our discussion on racism and discrimination could not be had without talking about so many other issues that racialized people tend to experience.



### **What are the causes of the problem?**

The causes of systemic racism and discrimination are very much linked with other issues marginalized people face, which is why in trying to understand and explain the causes of these problems we discussed many different social issues.

- **Classism and the cycle of poverty:** the group discussed the difficulty of being stuck on social assistance, and how there is no bridge between classes. It can be extremely difficult to plan and move forward (to go back to school, to afford to take the metro to look for work, to afford to eat enough, etc) when stuck on a limited income.  
The intersection of mental illness with class and poverty was also a big point of discussion. Participants who live with a mental illness have been unfairly punished for missing work because of their illness. The ableist structure of most school and workplaces and the lack of alternative structures keep people in poverty. For example, schools are not well adapted to meet the diverse needs of those with mental illnesses, and therefore it is extremely difficult for people living in poverty and with a mental illness to get a good education and be upwardly mobile between classes. The effects of struggling with poverty also tend to impact mental illness, and can make taking care of one's self more difficult, which in turn makes it a cycle that is very difficult to break from.
- **Homelessness and housing:** the group discussed gentrification and social housing. One participant shared his extensive experience with social housing, and the restrictive, unsafe and unhealthy nature of it. He explained how living in socially assisted housing means that he has little choice in where he ends up living, which can make transportation around the city costly and time consuming, which acts as another barrier to school and/or work. He also feels unsafe in his building and constantly fears for the safety of his wife because of the gang members who have taken over one of the building units. The gang members tend to loiter in the entrance and have Tasers. There is also a constant cockroach issue in the building.  
Being on social aid also makes it difficult to rent any apartment that is not social housing, not only because of high costs but also because landlords do not want to rent to people whose main source of income is social aid.  
The group also discussed the increase in condominiums being built in central places (for example: There are condos being built in the place where the old Children's Hospital used to be on Atwater, despite the high density of indigenous homeless people who frequent the park across the street, Cabot Square and the urgent need for more housing for more social housing).
- **Profiling:** the group discussed being singled out in stores, so for example, being followed by a clerk, yelled at, or told to leave one's bag at the counter. This differential treatment has led multiple group members to feel humiliated, and to avoid certain stores.
- **Social exclusion and bullying in educational institutions:** multiple group members shared experiences of bullying. A common experience was bullying throughout their school career (elementary and high school). For one group member, the verbal and physical abuse was so bad that he left the education system in secondary three. Another group member said that bullying caused her to repeat several grades. Rumors, threats, and insults, often targeting her sexuality,

made it very difficult for her to focus on her studies. Both members of the group who shared their bullying experiences said that the school administration and teachers were unresponsive and unhelpful in dealing with the situations.

One group member mentioned friends explicitly saying to her that they did not want to introduce her to their friends, because she was First Nations and Anglophone.

- **Discrimination in the medical system:** one participant explained that a doctor refused to treat him for his illness.
- **Education:** A lack of education regarding the history and present day realities of indigenous people in Canada was mentioned as one of the causes of racism and discrimination. Erasure of past and present traumas and current realities is painful and offensive. One participant once had a teacher tell the class that indigenous people have gone extinct, despite the fact that this student (who is indigenous) was present in the class.  
A lack of sensitivity from teachers was a recurring theme. Several participants noted that teachers did not take action when students made problematic comments, and that there were inadequate consequences for students who made school a hostile place for others.
- **Government regulated identity:** historically many Indigenous people chose to not be a registered Indian as an act of self-preservation and protection. Today, descendants of those people do not have access to certain rights and benefits that Status Indians have.
- **A police force that doesn't serve all communities equally:** A common experience among the group was that the police could not be relied upon for helping solve problems or address fears or dangers that individuals may face, and that contrarily, the police inspire more fear among group members and their communities than anything else. Group members felt that the police lack training in indigenous specific issues, and resort to violence too quickly instead of attempting harm-reduction approaches.  
One group member who lives in social housing mentioned that the police are called so often to his building that often either they will not even show up, they will take a long time, or they will come and they will not be helpful.
- **Lack of support for those with mental illnesses:** As previously already mentioned, mental illness and the obstacles that it creates in everyday life were mentioned during our activity as something that can worsen racism and discrimination. For example, having a mental illness makes it harder to maintain a job, and not having a job and living in poverty makes it harder to feel mentally well and makes it harder to deal with all of the many other effects systemic racism and discrimination can have on a person.

### **What can we do?**

- 1) **Solution:** Provide more opportunities for youth involvement in civil society, politics, decision making, etc. and publicize more about existing youth engagement and networking opportunities.  
**How:** More youth councils, more opportunities for youth to engage with decision makers (ex: provide youth with the opportunity to meet with Montreal city council to discuss issues they think are important). Provide platforms for the voices of youth to be heard and understood and

provide space for them to be effective changemakers. Make these opportunities and platforms known to the marginalized youth who are already most often excluded from these processes.

Who: Citizens, civil society, city and boroughs

- 2) Solution: To be able to meet the needs of youth who learn differently.  
How: Alternative education programs that are adapted to different learning needs due to mental illness or disability.  
Who: Superior governments
- 3) Solution: Better representation of Montreal's diversity in public office.  
Who: City and boroughs
- 4) Solution: Increase the amount of social housing and improve the quality of it.  
How: City legislation that require a certain percentage of new developments being built to be accessible housing and not condos.  
Who: City and boroughs
- 5) Solution: Increased hours of training and improved quality of training for police force and law enforcement officials.  
How: Give the SPVM trainings on specific issues that people who they deal with might be facing (for example: poverty, mental illness, etc). Work with community groups to better understand community needs and realities.  
Who: City and boroughs and civil society
- 6) Solution: Alternative patrol force to police  
How: Community members volunteer to offer protection and mediate issues.  
Who: Citizens and civil society
- 7) Solution: Educate the public more about indigenous people and realities.  
How: Public awareness campaigns (posters, art, murals, etc). An improved and more critical and thorough educational curriculum on indigenous history  
Who: Civil society, superior governments, city and boroughs
- 8) Solution: Empower people with information to help themselves  
How: Educate them about their rights and resources available to them.  
Who: Civil society, citizens
- 9) Solution: Empower people to defend themselves.  
How: Self-defense classes.  
Who: Citizens, civil society



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Video related to housing discrimination that was made in 2016 by Native Montreal in partnership with Wapikoni Mobile: <https://vimeo.com/161028670>

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