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Location, location, location! Regional variations in social support in the Canadian Arctic

Inuit living in the Nunavik region experience substantially lower levels of social support than those living in the other three Arctic regions of Canada, according to a study published recently in the *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*. Findings showed that the odds of having someone to talk to, to party with or to take you to the doctor were consistently lower for the inhabitants of this region.

In 2006, over three-quarters of Canada's Inuit were living in small communities in the Arctic. Relative to the rest of Canada, the Inuit population is very young - a median age of 22 years, compared with 40 years in the general Canadian population - and growing rapidly. Between 1996 and 2006, their numbers increased by 26% - over three times the growth in Canada as a whole during the same period.

Societies that foster socially supportive networks produce healthier populations, and Inuit society is no exception. In recent decades, however, the Inuit have experienced a rapid transformation from their traditional way of life to a market economy – a shift that has been accompanied by an increase in violence, addictions and suicide. Although these processes are clearly related, very little is known about the characteristics that provide access to social support among the Inuit.

Geographer Chantelle Richmond set out to explore how supportive social networks are linked to other social determinants of health, such as age, gender, language and participation in traditional hunting and gathering activities in the Arctic, using data from Statistics Canada's 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey. The large sample (26,290) of Inuit adults who took part in the Arctic

Table III. Percentage of Inuit in arctic regions of Canada (n=26,290) reporting high levels of various types of social support by selected health determinants: 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey.

Variable	Positive interaction(% support)	Emotional support(%)	Tangible support(%)	Affection & intimacy(%)
GENDER				
Male	73	60*	62*	71*
Female	75	65	67	76
AGE				
15–24	74	61	63	71
25–34	75	63	64	76
35–44	75	64	65	77
45–54	78	65	68	76
55+	66	58	65	69
ARCTIC REGION				
Nunatsiavut	84*	79*	87*	88*
Inuvialuit	81	72	76	83
Nunavut	73	60	62	73
Nunavik	68	55	54	66
MARITAL STATUS				
Married	79	68	71*	81
Single	71	46	61	70
ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE USE				
Speaks/understands	85	81	61*	88
Does not speak/ understand	72	59	88	71
HARVESTING ACTIVITIES (past year)				
Did not hunt	76	62	64	75
Hunted	76	64	65	75
Did not fish	76	64	61*	76
Fished	72	62	66	72
Did not gather	70	59	61*	70
Gathered	71	60	67	72

* p>.01 (χ² test)

Supplement of the survey responded to a wide variety of questions, including a series about the various types of support available to them.

From the information they provided, Richmond identified and analyzed four different aspects of social support - positive social interaction, affection and intimacy, emotional support and tangible support. Her study presents findings from a series of descriptive and logistic regression analyses about which groups were most likely to have the support they need, and which were least likely.

Some results came as no surprise, supporting previous studies in this area of research. Women, for example, reported higher levels of support; they were almost 1.5 times more likely than men to report good tangible support and having someone to show them love and affection. Older men, in particular, were most isolated from an active family / friendship support network.

Other findings were less expected - particularly those related to specific Inuit-relevant factors. To find out more about the social determinants of health among the Inuit, and to discuss the policy implications of this exploratory analysis, come and join us at the UWORDC Brown Bag on Wednesday, November 10, 2010, Social Science Centre Room 5220.

Note: Summary prepared by Heather Juby, CRDCN Knowledge Transfer Coordinator, based on Richmond, Chantelle A.M. 2009. The Social Determinants of Inuit Health: A Focus on Social Support in the Canadian Arctic. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health* 68(5): 471-487. Contact chantelle.richmond@uwo.ca for more information.

The analysis was carried out at the University of Western Ontario Research Data Centre. The Research Data Centre program is part of an initiative by Statistics Canada, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and university consortia to strengthen Canada's social research capacity.