



PHOTO CREDIT: DROP THE LABEL MOVEMENT ON UNSPLASH

► Building the New “Found” Generation: The Indigenous Recovery Corps

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Over the last century, Indigenous communities have had generation after generation of young leaders stolen from them. It started with waves of epidemic diseases that killed tens of thousands of people and undermined First Nations for decades, leaving them seriously weakened. Residential schools subsequently removed thousands of Indigenous youth and later returned the young people to their communities, hurt and alienated from their cultures.

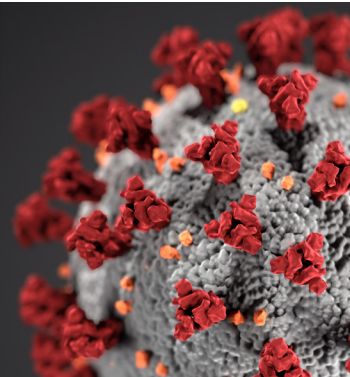
The process of losing generations of future leaders continued through the 1960s scoop, which removed Indigenous children from their families and placed them with non-Indigenous parents. For the last 30 years, widespread economic marginalization robbed First Nations of other generations of leaders and leadership opportunities. With the coronavirus pandemic, the prospect of yet another Lost Generation now looms—a cruel and harsh twist that would only exacerbate the challenges facing First Nations.

As the scale and intensity of the coronavirus pandemic becomes clearer, it is obvious that proactive interventions will be needed to offset the negative effects of the crisis. As unemployment soars beyond a million people, it is obvious that the Canadian world of work is facing a virtual meltdown. In critical circumstances like this, marginalized people, are often forgotten, left behind as the country focuses its efforts on major cities and large employers. Facing the prospect of another Lost Generation of Indigenous youth, it is vital that Canada act decisively, converting the challenges of today into real opportunities for the future.

Indigenous communities already experience the highest unemployment rates in the country. With the natural resource sector already suffering through widespread closures, the situation is more dire than usual. As major employers lay off hundreds of northern workers, as governments cut back on services, and as security

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blockades of Indigenous communities undermine tourism and other sectors, the Indigenous economic catastrophe is shaping up as the most dramatic in recent history.

Recent college, polytech and university graduates are on the verge of adding to the unfolding crisis. These young people heeded the call of elders, parents and community leaders to invest in their future and the long-term prosperity of Indigenous peoples by pursuing their studies. Now, they are entering one of the worst employment markets in history and are sure to struggle to find jobs.

It is well-known that graduates emerging from their studies into a recession, let alone a severe depression, have historically suffered grievously from the unfortunate timing. They have difficulty finding jobs and meaningful career opportunities. They struggle to regain their financial feet, many never fully recovering in terms of lost income, career progression, pension and other benefits. They suffer, too, by the fact that each year produces a new cohort of graduates, also scrambling for a place in the workforce and often shouldering aside the ones who previously convoked into economic chaos.

In the next few months, thousands of talented and eager Indigenous students will graduate into a distressingly uncertain workforce. Canada will not allow them to suffer unduly. There will be employment insurance, welfare and maybe even a surge in the traditional make-work programs that the country uses to patch over economic distress. But there is an alternative to such unproductive interventions.

Indigenous communities need the expertise, energy and passion of their young people. They are in the midst of the greatest indigenous business expansion ever, with self-government and treaty settlements creating new opportunities, and with a deep commitment to cultural revitalization. The current crisis, reinforced by the unfolding decline in the oil and gas sector, is hitting vulnerable Indigenous communities at a time of fundamental and proactive transformation.

Given that the country will be paying for the unemployed Indigenous graduates in any case, just as they will find a way to care for tens of thousands of other displaced workers, surely something more constructive can be done. Rather than waiting for these graduates to venture into an unwelcoming work employment environment, government, business and institutional leaders have a chance to doing something dramatic and innovative. The response to the employment crisis will have to be comprehensive in nature, for the job losses have been catastrophic. But the specific challenges facing Indigenous graduates are real and sufficiently different from the rest of the economy to merit special attention.

The central ideas behind the Indigenous Recovery Corps is simple: utilize the available university graduates to address the most urgent needs of Indigenous communities and organizations. The priorities, set

by the Indigenous leadership, could include the following: supporting Indigenous economic development corporations or Indigenous-owned business, helping friendship centres, working with urban aboriginal organizations, assisting Indigenous governments, learning Indigenous languages and culture, tackling high priority research projects, and supporting community development. Working on these projects for a period of 4 to 12 months would give graduates practical, career-related experience.

Supporting the work of the Corps would require substantial commitment from Indigenous organizations and supporting institutions. Business leaders would take on management interns. College and university professors could take on research associates. Indigenous political and administrative leaders would supervise government trainees. Non-government organization officials would provide supervised work placements. Ideally these positions would focus on a new and targeted assignments rather than standard operational work. The priority would be on work-ready activities that would, when the coronavirus pandemic lifts, leave the graduates better prepared for entrance into the work force.

The members of the Indigenous Recovery Corps would be paid for their work. In keeping with the emergency situation facing the country, the pay would be limited to, perhaps, \$20,000 per year. This sum would be instead of anticipated expenditures on Employment Insurance, welfare payments and/or emergency make-work projects. The funds would flow directly to the graduates, primarily to save the burden on the supporting organizations. The IRC would convert an urgent necessity into a proactive development initiative.

Indigenous governments and organizations would need to see significant benefit to their organizations and to the recent graduates. Instead of the “holding pattern” government expenditures that are standard fare in such economic downturns, the Indigenous Recovery Corps would convert the crisis into a national Indigenous professional development opportunity that would infuse enthusiastic, youthful energy into hundreds of Indigenous organizations across the country. Most importantly, it would avoid the additional crisis of creating another “lost generation” of Indigenous youth.



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