# BEYOND 'AT RISK':
# INDIGENOUS YOUTH SPEAK TO SERVICE PROVIDERS

As a service provider, the lens through which you view young people has a profound impact on the ways that your programs and the systems you work in will impact youth, their families and communities. The lens of 'risk' is often used to portray Indigenous young people in order to signal their vulnerability and the need for specialized services. Yet calling youth 'at risk' often ends up obscuring the many strengths Indigenous youth hold and instead brings only their marginalization into view. Youth have said that being labeled 'at risk' can be stigmatizing and can create barriers to accessing the very services intended to meet their needs.

Indigenous youth asked their peers how they experience the term 'at risk' and how they would like to be seen by service providers like you. The youth clearly said that they hope people working in health services, including sexual and reproductive health, will look beyond discourses of risk to see and hear young people in ways that are holistic, strengths-based, and celebratory.

## What Indigenous youth want you to hear

1. **Indigenous youth are not inherently 'at risk'. Risk is created by colonialism.** The label 'at risk' naturalizes the idea that Indigenous youth live inherently risky lives, rather than situating the source of risk within systems of power which devalue Indigenous lives, create intergenerational trauma and foster displacement, disconnection and illness.
2. **Risk connotes weakness, not strength. Let's find ways to talk about the strengths that youth hold.** Get creative in the words you use to talk about **Indigenous** youth. How do youth talk about themselves? What can be celebrated, embraced, nurtured in the Indigenous youth in your community?
3. **Beyond simplistic stereotypes lie the strengths and complex knowledges of Indigenous youth.** Singular narratives about native youth are harmful.
4. **Youth are situated in networks of relationship,** which can provide strength, skills, knowledge and sustenance.
5. **Youth are the experts of their own lives.** They hold immense knowledge and their voices deserve to be heard. **Are you listening?**

## About this project

This research project was started by Indigenous youth from across Canada who were interested in consulting with other Indigenous youth about the term 'at risk' and what other language might be used to talk about their lives and identities. A total of 25 youth from across Canada completed surveys. The team of youth co-researchers then used arts-based methods to identify key findings.

*Beyond 'At Risk'* is a research project of the National Indigenous Youth Council on Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS (NIYCSHA) and the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network (CAAN) in collaboration with professors Natalie Clark (Métis) of Thompson Rivers University (TRU) and Sarah Hunt (Kwagiulth) of the University of British Columbia (UBC). We thank CIHR for the funding to support this work.