



Improving Shelter Experience for Indigenous Women

March 26th, 2026



Circling Buffalo Inc.



RESOLVE
Research and Education for Solutions to Violence and Abuse



University
of Manitoba

Land Acknowledgement

The University of Manitoba campuses are located on the original lands of Anishinaabeg, Ininiwak, Anisininewuk, Dakota Oyate, Dene and Inuit, and on the National Homeland of the Red River Métis. We respect the treaties made on these territories, we acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past, and dedicate ourselves to move forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and collaboration.



Acknowledgements

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- Alexandra Arthurs, Research Assistant, RESOLVE Manitoba, University of Manitoba
- Grace Holwell, Research Assistant, RESOLVE Manitoba, University of Manitoba

A very special thank you to the survivors of intimate partner violence and service providers who participated in the project. Their participation is integral to creating knowledge that will guide progress and positive change. These contributions are greatly appreciated.

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Content Advisory

A note of care: this webinar contains material that may be upsetting to some people. Please take care of yourself accordingly.

Family Violence Resources:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/stop-family-violence/services.html>

ShelterSafe:

<https://sheltersafe.ca/national/>



About the Study

Indigenous women in Canada experience disproportionately high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV), leading to greater reliance on emergency shelters.

Our Purpose:

To explore and understand Indigenous women's experiences in shelters across Manitoba, focusing on access, service delivery, satisfaction, and recommendations for improving services and informing policy.

Our Guiding Questions:

1. What are Indigenous women's experiences accessing and staying at Indigenous and non-Indigenous-led shelters in rural and urban areas of Manitoba?
 - a. How did they access the women's shelter?
 - b. What are the challenges they faced in accessing the shelter?
 - c. What challenges did they experience while staying at the shelter?
2. What are the Indigenous and non-Indigenous-identifying service providers' experiences supporting Indigenous women in rural and urban shelters in Manitoba?
 - a. What are the challenges they faced? What worked and did not work?
3. How to improve the existing IPV-specific services for Indigenous women in rural and urban areas of Manitoba?
 - a. How to improve the experience of Indigenous women's stay at women's shelters? What needs to change?
 - b. How to improve Indigenous and non-Indigenous service provider's ability to support Indigenous women?

About the Study

Our Approach

- Began with a sweat led by Elder Norman Campbell (Redsky)
- Conducted a literature review to guide study design
- Collaborated with an Indigenous Advisory Circle (shelter directors from First Nation reserves across Manitoba)
- Co-developed study focus, questions, and interview approach
- Interviews/conversations led by an Indigenous MSW student to ensure a culturally grounded, relational process
- Ongoing guidance from the Advisory Circle throughout
- Concluded with a talking circle to share findings and gather feedback
- Provided participants with a plain-language summary of results

How We Conducted Our Study

- 24 conversations took place, including 12 Indigenous survivors and 12 service providers working closely with Indigenous communities.
- All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using generic thematic analysis to identify the main patterns and themes in their experiences.
- Digital mapping (ArcGIS) was used to assess and illustrate geographic influences and barriers to help-seeking



Participant Eligibility



Survivors:

- 18 years of age or older.
- Identify as Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit, or other ways).
- Identify as woman (including Two-Spirit and transgender woman).
- Reside in Manitoba at the time of help-seeking for intimate partner violence in the past 5 years.
- Accessed women's shelter because of intimate partner violence (IPV).
- Living safely away from their abusive partner.
- Accessed Indigenous-led and non-Indigenous-led women's shelter (desirable if both) in the past 5 years.

Service Providers:

- Currently working or has experience working at a women's shelter in the past 5 years.
- Supported Indigenous women at a women's shelter in Manitoba in the past 5 years.

Recruitment of Survivors and Service Providers

Recruitment of Survivors

- Information was sent to shelters, and they would share with residents.
- Interested participants contacted the RESOLVE office or the researcher directly; we would then explain the study, do the pre-screening, and schedule the interview time (often outside work hours).
- I was a guest to their community and was able to connect to the place/land when the participants were sharing.
- Conversations varied from approximately 30 mins to 2 hours (guided by an interview guide but participants could also raise concerns freely).
- \$50 honorariums were completed by email money transfer, provided in-person, or dropped off with a staff member of a shelter/community resource.

Recruitment of Service Providers

- Information notice was sent to shelters across the province (both provincial and First Nation).
- Interested participants contacted the RESOLVE office or the researcher directly; we would then explain the study, do the pre-screening, and schedule the interview time.
- Interviews were conducted via Zoom or in-person.
- Conversations lasted 28 minutes - 1.5 hours.
- \$50 honorariums were completed by email money transfer or provided in-person.



Recruitment of Survivors and Service Providers

Challenges with Recruitment

- Not all survivor participants moved forward to their next step - many participants who were interested but didn't follow through with the process.
- If survivor participants were calling from a shelter, sometimes it was difficult to contact them.
- Zoom was not always an option for some participants due to connection issues.
- The wildfires in Manitoba impacted many participants from participating in this process.

Reflections

- It is incredibly important to handle with care the information that was shared by participants and to ensure what was said is translated accordingly.
- Importance of the appropriate use of humour.
- I would like to uplift and honor all those participants who shared their story with me.
- I would also like to uplift and honour all of the participants who expressed interest in participating but were unable to.
- As Indigenous people, we are always hoping for change. From participating in this project, I hope too that the participants' voices are heard and that changes are coming.



Conversations - Who We Spoke With

Survivors:

- We had conversations with 12 survivors; all identified as Indigenous.
- 11 identified as women (1 woman noted being in a same sex relationship); 1 identified as Two-Spirit.

Age Range:

- 25 - 59 years

Location:

- 8 Urban
- 3 On-reserve
- 1 Rural



What Survivors Told Us

Stories of Abuse:

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Verbal abuse
- Financial abuse
- Coercive control
- Substance use coercion



Shelter Services

Survivors talked about having access to numerous services, including:

- Cultural supports.
 - Traditional ceremonies and medicines.
 - Beading, cultural foods, drumming, sharing circles, and access to Elders, were mentioned but talked about less.
- Counselling services.
- Transportation services.
- Child supports.
- Clothing.
- Assistance with housing, legal services and employment income assistance.



Challenges Survivors Faced In-Shelter

Some survivors received limited support from staff.

- *If shelters can just reassure us, promise us like... We're trying to help you to feel safe. We want to help give you resources... so you don't have to go back to him. Just like that, instead of just not even listening. There needs to be someone to take more time, more patience and listen.*
- *Depending on the workers, some of them are very informed, they give you all the information that they know or what's available. But there are a lot of times where there's some workers where they just won't take the time. They don't want to explain it or let you know.*

Some survivors faced discrimination while in-shelter, including racism and homophobia.

- *"In... the shelter too they [Indigenous women] got that treatment. They got... like picked on."*
- *I told her [a Shelter Worker] "Yeah I identify myself as a guy but I'm a woman though"... then maybe an hour later she brings me into the office and is like "hey, we're going to be moving you." And I was like, "Why? Why are you moving me?" She's like "You identified yourself as a man, and this is a women's shelter. Women and children only"*



Challenges Survivors Faced In-Shelter

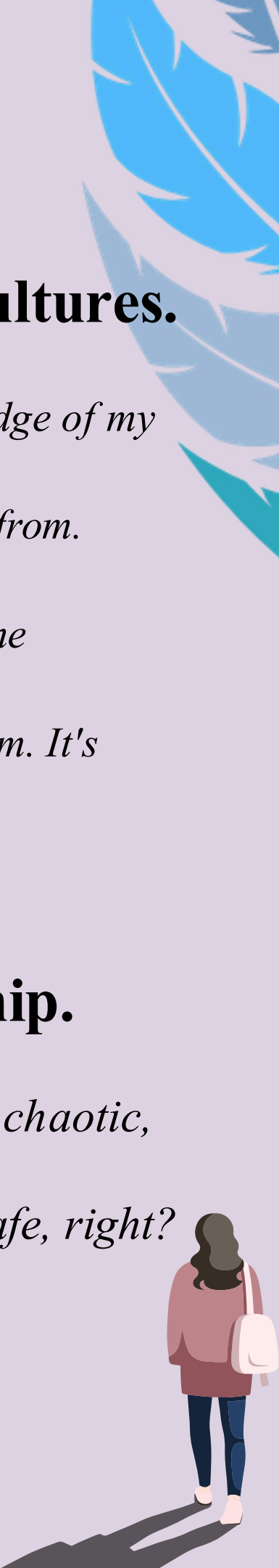
Survivors shared that shelter staff had minimal knowledge of Indigenous communities and cultures.

- *I would prefer, to be honest, to go to a Native shelter... because I just felt that they weren't experienced enough, or they had low knowledge of my Native background or anything like that. So I felt that... they wouldn't know anything of my background, or who I am, or where I come from.*
- *A first and foremost, there has to be the cultural sensitive training all across the board for everyone, so they understand the impact of the generational trauma, the history and how folks have used coping skills in order to deal with that trauma in whatever way, shape, or form. It's amazing the strength and the resilience that I find folks dealing with.*

Survivors talked about working through difficult emotions after leaving an abusive relationship.

- *I think going into a shelter is daunting too, because you don't know what to expect. I mean, so you're going from one very chaotic, violently explosive situation, and then going into a shelter, and you're still... trying to calm down and realize that you're safe, right?*

Some survivors shared that they were not offered counseling supports in shelter.



Help Seeking

Some survivors got help from formal supports, such as:

- Police
- Hospital staff
- Counselling supports
- Substance use support services
- Chief and Council

Some survivors got help from informal supports, including:

- Family
- Friends
- Elders
- Coworkers
- Community

Some survivors didn't reach out to any supports while experiencing abuse.



Barriers Survivors Faced Accessing Supports

Survivors faced numerous barriers when seeking supports, such as:

- Difficulty contacting shelters and being unaware of the shelter locations.
- Shelters only accepted women and families.
- Shelters were at full capacity and had long waitlists.
 - *I tried to sign up for a woman shelter, the woman shelter has a really long waiting list. And then I only had the emergency shelters available to me. They told me that I wasn't able to get in.*
- Feelings of shame and stigma.
 - *Of course, I was embarrassed and I really didn't want people to know what I was going through because of that stigma and that shame, the embarrassment, people judging me.*
- Fear of discrimination.
 - *I didn't want to go to the cops because every time the cop is involved, I always get the least end of the stick because I look like a guy, and the women in the relationships they believed them first and then the dominant.*



Barriers Survivors Faced Accessing Supports

- Transportation barriers.
 - *There are times you didn't have bus fare and the only time you can get bus fare is only if the offices are open during the day. But you know what I mean, to get your bus tickets, but if it's late at night, let's say in the evening late, like 10 o'clock 11, you don't have no bus tickets... You're limited, I will say.*



Shelter Experiences

Positive shelter experience

- 8 survivors had a positive experience in shelter.
 - *“Was always welcome there and I wasn't judged or looked at.”*

Neutral experience

- 3 survivors had a neutral experience in shelter.
 - *“My experience is probably neutral, I like – everyone there liked me. Excluding that one worker. Everyone there liked me... So gotta give it 50-50 like it did work, but it did not work. Because I ended up going back.”*

Negative experience

- 1 survivor noted having a negative experience in shelter.
 - *“I don't know, if this were to happen again - And I had to go to the cops and then if they said I have to go to [Shelter Location], I said “I'll just go back”*



Who We Talked To

Service Providers:

- We had conversations with 12 service providers; all identified as Indigenous.
- 11 service providers worked at Indigenous shelters and 1 worked at a non-Indigenous shelter.

Years of Service:

- Less than 1 year to 7 + years.

Roles:

- 5 Support Workers
- 3 Directors
- 1 Assistant Director
- 2 Elders/Knowledge Keepers
- 1 Support Worker/ Security Guard



Shelter Services

Service providers talked about the services their shelter offers, including:

- Cultural services.
 - Traditional ceremonies.
 - Access to Elders.
 - Access to medicines.
 - Sharing circles.
- Counselling supports.
- Hygiene kits.
- Baby formula and diapers.
- Clothing.
- Assistance with getting identification documents, access healthcare, secure housing, educational supports and other resources.
- Transportation services.



Challenges Survivors Faced In-Shelter

Service providers talked about the challenges they have seen survivors face in shelter, such as:

- Loneliness due to leaving their families and communities to seek shelter.
 - *I would say loneliness and just being alone, no one to talk to, no family, no friends, no partner. So they're really alone...
imagine if you're in a community where you're not even from...It's like a layered loneliness.*
- Adjusting to shelter rules.
 - *Living their first two weeks is just really rough, or their first 10 days...hard adjusting*
- Having difficulty accessing housing.
 - *Finding housing is another barrier for women, especially if they've lived on reserve, never renting a home before, they don't have rental history and then places generally give women a harder time who are on income assistance or, you know, they've had that experiences. So women get labeled a lot here.*



Challenges Survivors Faced

- Policy restrictions.
 - Specifically, a policy that prevents boys over the age of 12 from staying in shelter with their parent.
 - *I can't see the women coming here and having to leave one of their child at home because he's over the age of 11.*
- Withdrawal symptoms from substance use.
- Transportation issues when seeking services outside of the city.
- Barriers receiving income assistance.
 - *Some of the other barriers are because some of our women are receiving income assistance from their band, which is federal money ... that's a lengthy process trying to get them off band assistance and onto provincial assistance and acquiring the required documents that they need.*
They must have ID, they must have bank statements. They must have a bank account ID for their children.
- Difficulty finding contact information for shelters.
 - *Just being able to find the intake number or the intake referral... it's hard to go through... they have to do little bit of work to find the number...*



Challenges Service Providers Face

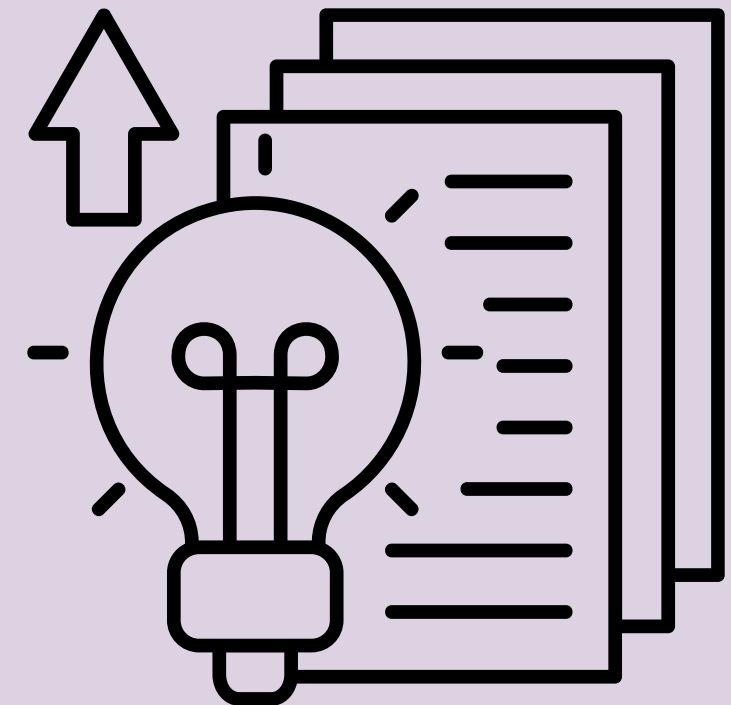
Challenges service providers face in their roles:

- Securing housing for survivors, due to limited housing availabilities.
- Getting social assistance for survivors.
- Managing policy restrictions, specifically the policy preventing older boys from staying in shelter with their parent.
- Dealing with safety concerns within their community due to their work.
- Emotional strains that come with their role.



Recommendations

1. Offer more cultural and traditional services in shelters.
2. Address staff shortages and knowledge gaps.
3. Provide longer shelter stays and transitional housing.
4. More education and community outreach.
5. More collaboration among IPV (Intimate Partner Violence) services.



Why Use Geographic Approaches and Tools in IPV Research?

Geographic location influences survivors' experiences of IPV and IPV help-seeking.

Maps can allow us to visualize...

- The location and distribution of IPV incidents.
- The location and distribution of infrastructure and resources for help-seeking.
- Survivors help-seeking journeys.

Which is powerful for...

- Observing patterns and trends in IPV and IPV help-seeking.
- Highlighting geographic gaps, disparities, and barriers.
- Guiding the funding and allocation of future IPV services and resources.
- Informing IPV service delivery, policy, and research.

Sources: Coy et al., 2011; Pickover & Beck, 2021; Sheppard-Perkins et al., 2025



Why & How We Used Geographic Tools and Approaches

Goal

- Wanted to better understand and illustrate how geographic factors influence the help-seeking experiences of Indigenous women in Manitoba.

Task

- Create a StoryMap – combine maps, text, and multimedia content to create a digital, visual, and interactive story about the help-seeking journeys and experiences of survivors.

Tools

- Various tools, platforms, and databases on ArcGIS Online – a software for creating, analyzing, and sharing maps and geographic information.

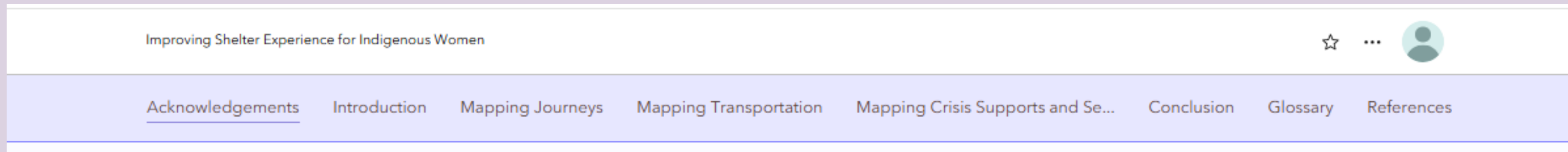
Steps

- Learned how to use and apply geographic software, tools, and approaches.
- Learned how geographic tools and approaches are currently being used in IPV research.
- Reviewed all conversations (interviews) with survivors and service providers to gather information related to geography.
- Gathered and created geographic information.
- Gathered and created narrative information.
- Designed and formatted the StoryMap.
- Compiled and integrated geographic and narrative components into StoryMap to create a cohesive story.
- Continuously discussed and collaborated with the Advisory Circle, PI, and GIS and Research Visualization Librarian.



About the StoryMap

Eight-part story – *Acknowledgements, Introduction, Mapping Journeys, Mapping Transportation, Mapping Crisis Supports and Services, Conclusion, Glossary, References*



About the StoryMap

What informed and inspired the StoryMap?

- The knowledge, wisdom, and experiences of survivors and service providers.
- Guidance, input, and advice from the Advisory Circle and GIS and Research Visualization Librarian.
- Research, literature, and media reports on various topics related to IPV, GIS, Indigeneity, and colonialism.



About the StoryMap

What is featured in the StoryMap?

- Covers three main themes related to geographic influences and barriers to help-seeking:

Survivors' Journeys to Shelter: The mobility and displacement of survivors

Access to Transportation: The transportation infrastructure in Manitoba; transportation barriers unique to northern and remote First Nation communities

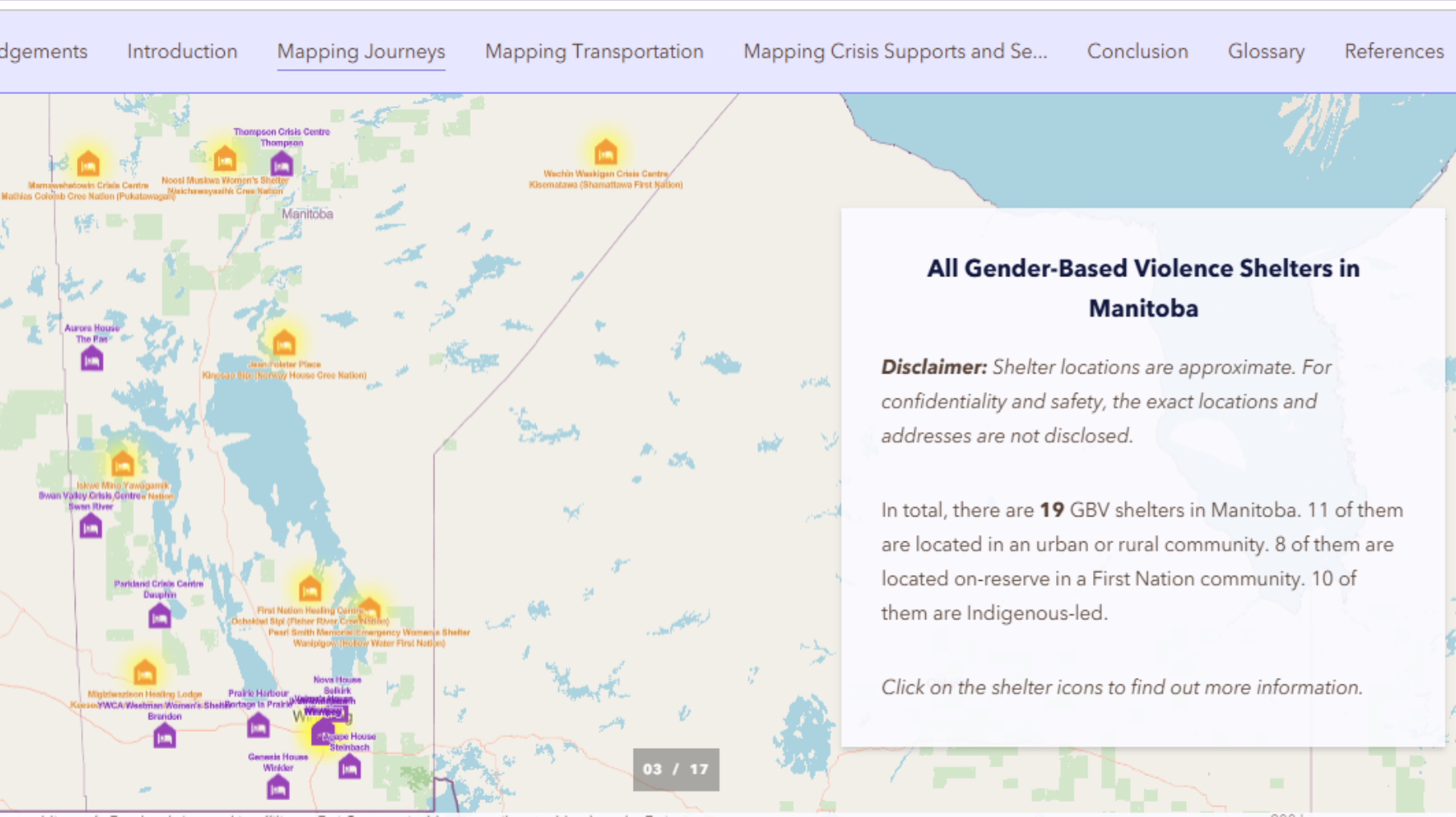
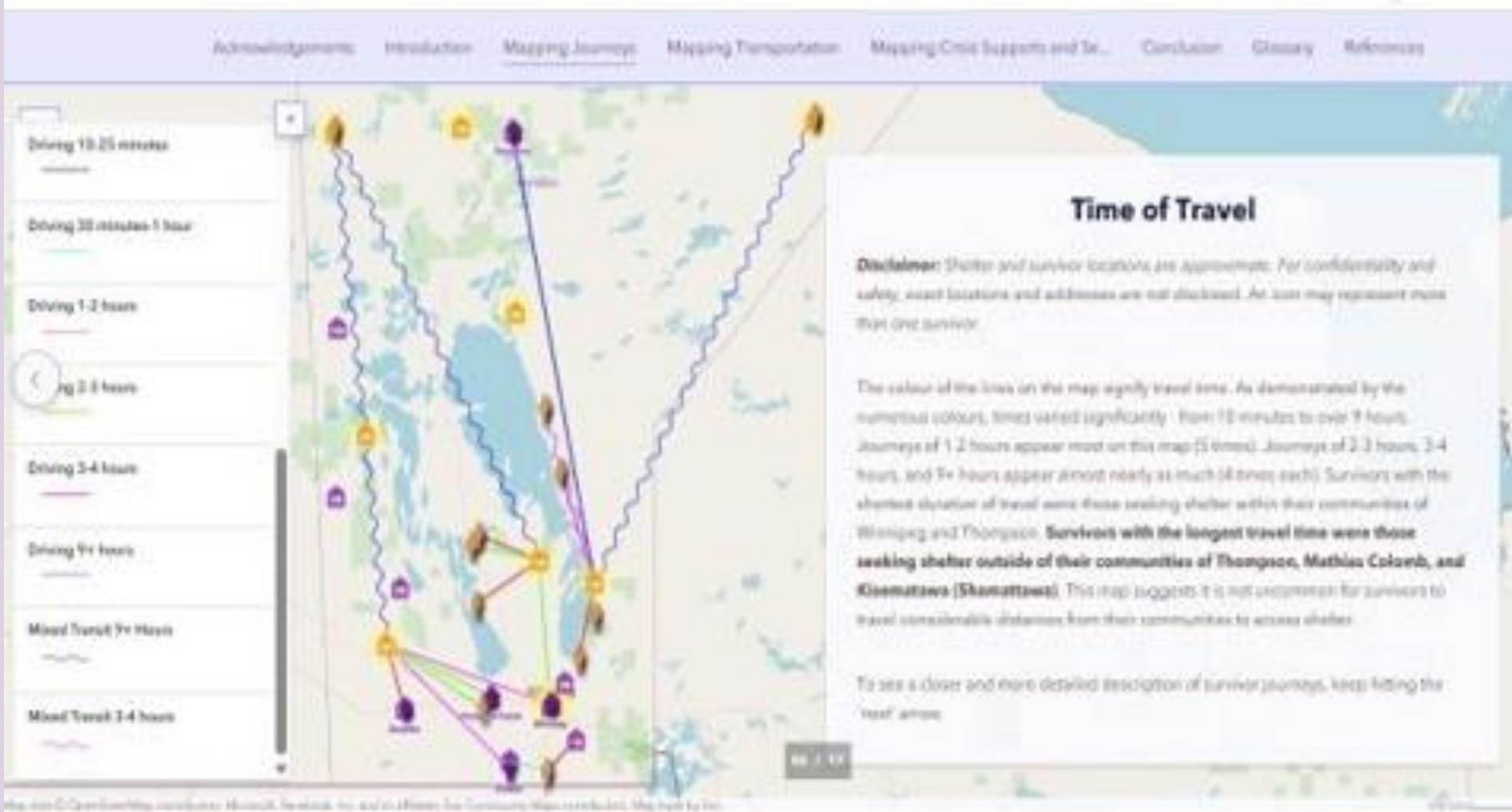
Access to IPV-Related Crisis Supports and Services: The distribution of help-seeking resources across Manitoba

- Themes are explored and explained using a combination of maps and narrative.
- All themes are analyzed and discussed in relation to colonialism.

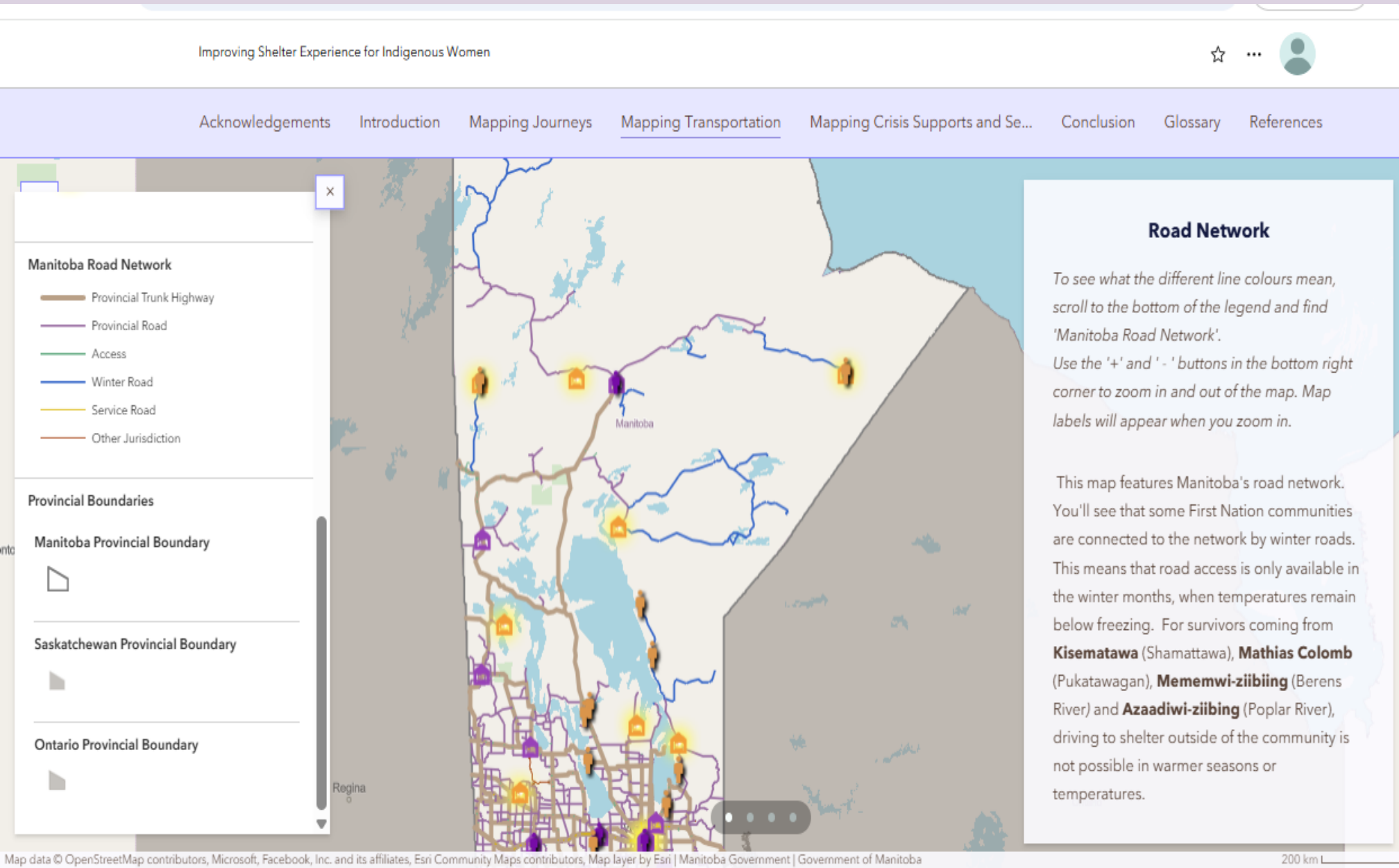


Pages from the StoryMap

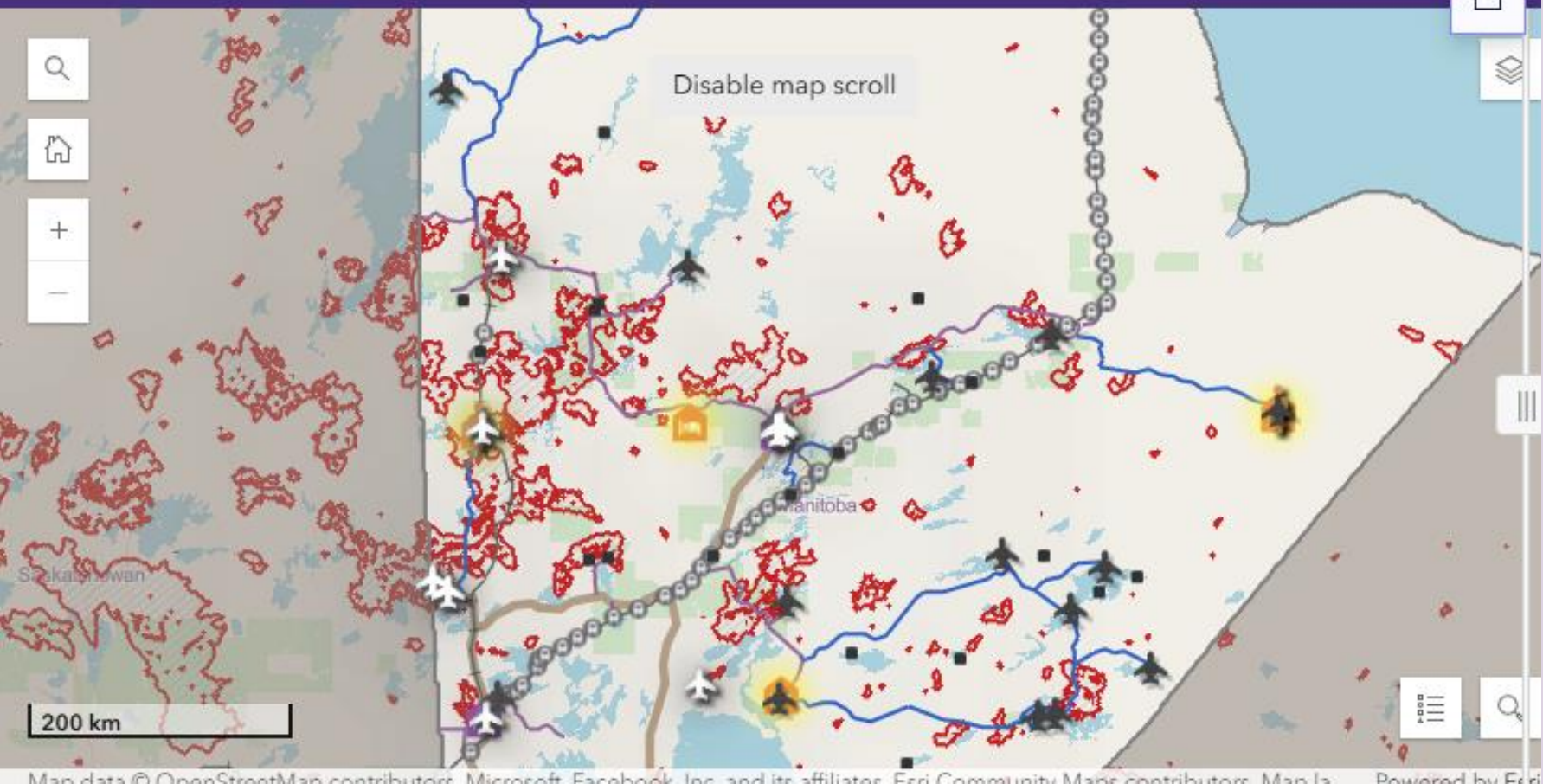
Survivors' Journeys to Shelter



Access to Transportation



The Impact of Climate on Transportation Access



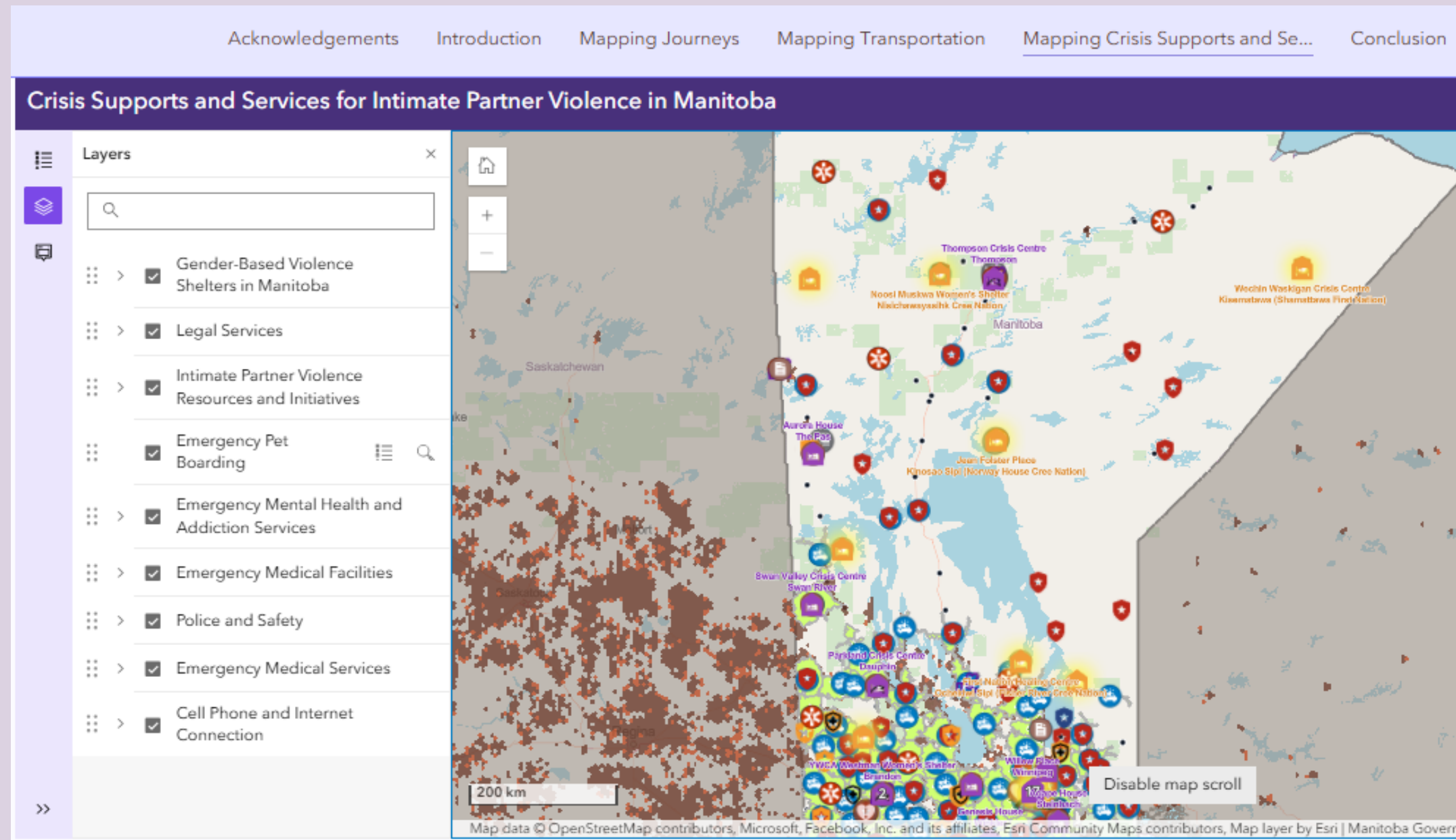
Below is an estimated cost breakdown of the journey that involves flying, bussing, and driving, assuming that the survivor is travelling with at least 2 children, as is typical, and that those children are ages 4 and 6. The plane cost estimates were provided by a service provider. The bus cost estimates are taken from the [NCN Thompson Bus Lines website](#). The fuel cost is estimated from a [fuel cost calculator](#), assuming a round trip from Ashern to Ochekwi-Sipi (Fisher River) is 186 KM, gas is 1.05/L, and the vehicle's fuel efficiency is 10 L/100 KM.

	Adult	Child (6)	Child (4)	Total
Plane Fare	\$1200	\$900	\$900	\$3000
Bus Fare	\$52.62	\$32.57	\$22.54	\$107.73
Fuel Cost	\$19.53	---	---	\$19.53
Total	\$1272.15	\$932.57	\$922.54	\$3127.26

Estimated cost for a survivor and her two children to travel from Mathias Colomb Cree Nation to a women's shelter in Ochekwi-Sipi (Fisher River) Cree Nation.

Price excluding tax.

Access to Crisis Supports and Services



Acknowledgements Introduction Mapping Journeys Mapping Transportation Mapping Crisis Supports and Se... Conclusion Glossary

Geographic Differences in Crisis Supports and Services

As with transportation infrastructure, crisis supports and services are unequally distributed amongst urban, rural, and First Nation communities and southern and northern parts of the province. Crisis supports and services are concentrated in the southern part of the province and/or located in cities, primarily in the urban city of Winnipeg. While all the services highlighted on the map are important to seeking and staying at shelter, two services were primarily mentioned in interviews with survivors and service providers: phone/internet services and emergency mental health and addiction services. Therefore, what the map reveals about access to these services is discussed in more detail.

Emergency Mental Health and Addictions Services

Multiple service providers mentioned that there are a lack of resources to support survivors experiencing a mental health crisis, active substance use, or the symptoms of withdrawal in or near their communities. This concern is visualized on the map. It demonstrates an overall shortage of these services across Manitoba. Available services are primarily located in Winnipeg, followed by medium and small cities, and are concentrated in the southern part of the province. A lack of access to emergency mental health and addictions supports presents barriers to seeking and staying at shelter. One service provider shared that they have to transfer survivors experiencing withdrawal out of shelter and into detox facilities, in which there are often not enough spots. An in-community detox facility is a "big need", according to a service provider from an on-reserve shelter. The closest facility is in Winnipeg, and people are often fearful or reluctant to access it or to travel to Winnipeg.

Phone and Internet Connection

In interviews with survivors and service providers, phone and internet connection was highlighted as something important to seeking and staying at shelter. When accessing shelter, some survivors used the internet to learn about and contact shelters. Other survivors used the phone to contact shelters and/or police. When staying at shelter, survivors used phone and internet services to contact essential social and financial services like Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Income Assistance. Service providers use phone and internet services to operate crisis lines, do intake, referrals, and transfers, communicate with other shelters, and to contact emergency services. The map shows disparities in internet and cellphone connection amongst urban and rural areas and northern vs. southern parts of the province. The more rural and north a community is, the less connection it has. The lack of digital connectivity in remote

Lessons from the StoryMap

Main Takeaway

The help-seeking journeys of Indigenous survivors, particularly those from remote First Nation communities, may involve **increased instances of displacement and longer, more complex and costly journeys**. This is tied to the legacy and continuation of colonialism (climate change, spatial inequality and marginalization)

A survivor may be forced to relocate from their community due to:

- A lack of access to culturally safe shelter services
- A lack of anonymity
- A lack of local infrastructure and resources for help-seeking

On these journeys to access shelter and other resources, excesses and limitations may be placed on survivors' mobility due to:

- Far proximity
- A lack of transportation infrastructure
- The impacts climate change
- A lack of telecommunications infrastructure



Lessons from the StoryMap

Other takeaways

The importance of...

An in-depth and broad understanding of 'access'

- Placed in social, historical, and political context
- Inclusive of the many determinants of 'access'
- Intersectional – acknowledging the interplay of these determinants

An awareness of Western, colonial, and ableist biases

- No base map available in ArcGIS that predominantly features all Indigenous names for places in 'Canada'.
- Some existing geospatial data sets lacked information on Indigenous owned/operated services and/or services located on-reserve.
- StoryMap not fully accessible to people who are colourblind or d/Deaf.
- Recognizing and critically reflecting on influence of own identity/positionality



Accessing the StoryMap

- Will be available online.
- Can be opened on a variety of technological devices - phone, tablet, computer (computer recommended).
- Can be printed as a PDF (though this will limit some of the available content and features).
- Can be shared via link and QR code.
- Open access – no payment, account, or registration required to view.

Link: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7ca10a7fcf754ed3ae9c15e215c6ab17>



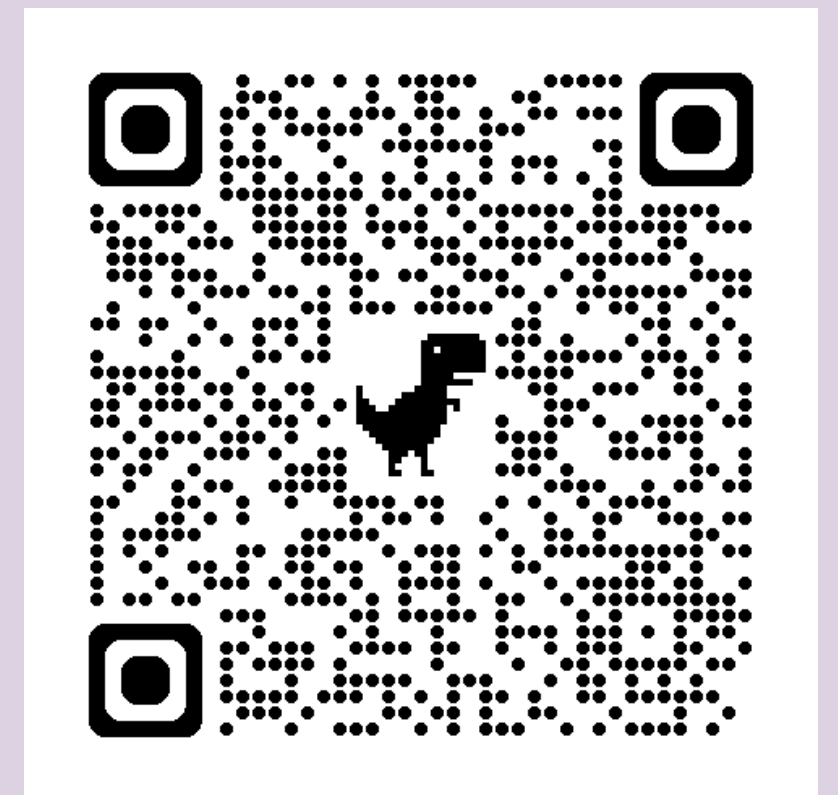
Questions and Comments

We would love to hear your thoughts!



Colonization, Decolonization and Cultural Safety: Family violence, Indigenous women, and Help-seeking at Women's Shelters Literature Review

To review our Circling Buffalo literature review, please scan
the QR code:



Thank You



<https://umanitoba.ca/resolve/>



/RESOLVEUmanitoba



/ResolveUm



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