

My name is Muma which means “ghost or spirit” in my language and that is how I feel – like a ghost – people see right through me. I am an Aboriginal from Australia who came to this country called Canada because I met a fellow called Jon back home who told me that this was a wonderful country where I could reach my dreams, a place where I could be happy. How was I to know he wasn’t even from Canada but formed his impression because of the work he did with Stats Canada. I apologise for using my notes but I am not smart like all of you here – I am just a simple man who wants to feel like he belongs here in this very big country.

Since I came here I have found out that the “First Nations” people here suffer much like those back in Australia. Here in Canada they are overrepresented in our jails. Their suicide rate is 5 to 6 times higher than the average 108 per 100,000 compared with 18 for the general population in some studies and 2 to 3 times the rate in others. Their children have Fetal Alcohol Syndrome at 25 times the national average and tuberculosis at 10 times the average. In 2001 there were 17% of them living in crowded situations off reserve compared with 7% for the country as a whole. Their state of mental health is difficult to assess since studies often base the data on individuals who are receiving services and for many reserves there are no services to be found.

But I am here to say they do not suffer alone, I went on a “walkabout” and met many people in this country who are poor and in pain. I talked with an elderly woman who won’t leave her house because she is too afraid, another who cannot see that there will ever be a sunny day. I talked with adults who cannot read and are afraid to admit it so they do not go to the Library across the street. I spoke with teenage mothers who already fear that their children will never have enough money for food let alone for all the “fine” things they see around them. I talked with other people who have recently arrived in this great country and they told me about how they feel, how hard it is to meet other people, how difficult to find employment, how alone they are. I have heard their pain and come here to ask if you have. I know you can calculate their low income, their inability to buy what you call a “basket of goods” but for many the low income is a result of their despair, their depression, their feelings of disconnectedness not the cause of it. I am here to ask if you have tried to find them before they became a LOCO number ..oops I mean a LICO number. I tried to find out if there were more psychologically fragile people last year than the year before but only found some “Wellness Survey” from 2002 and even there I only found out their age and gender not their ethnic background. I came here to ask you if you actually care who feels disconnected with their neighbourhood, their community, their province, their country. How many feel afraid? How many feel homeless? How many are like me – sliding into that LICO world that is so hard to get out of.

I see many smart learned people here so I know you know how to gather more data that will help you to know what programs will help and then your surveys or whatever will tell you if they have had an impact. I wonder why you don’t want better information on how people like me feel, on what we fear, on how we see government and our communities and each other. I know there is money to be allocated if you thought it was important. I know you know how to do it, I just don’t understand why you don’t do it.

*Thank you*