



# Inuit youth

## looking forward to grim future

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IQALUIT, Northwest Territories (CUP) — Snow-capped mountains in May surround this town of 3,000 residents who are sheltered from the cold Arctic wind blowing in from the north.

Iqaluit, the largest settlement on Baffin Island, defies the popular postcard image of parka-clad Inuit displaying their day's catch after an ice-fishing trip. Instead, most Iqaluit residents shop at the Bay, take taxis, or visit the busiest bar in town, the Zoo, for a brew after work.

Formerly known as Frobisher Bay, Iqaluit is Baffin Island's boom town. Although unemployment is high in the Northwest Territories, Iqaluit is where the "good" jobs are found, where the schools are located, and where 60 yellow taxis incongruously dot the Arctic landscape.

Yet most of the good jobs are filled by whites. According to a study released in August by the Department of Health and Welfare, the economic future for natives is dismal. The study says that Inuit in the North — more than 25,800 — suffer from a high unemployment rate and housing shortages while the white population continues to enjoy comparatively luxurious lifestyles.

The 200 students at Arctic College, a vocational school and the sole post-secondary institution on the island, want other Canadians to visit the North to see what life is like beyond the 60th parallel.

Louisa Pootoolik, 21, an Arctic College student, says Inuit youth suffer from alienation and lack of activities in the town.

"There aren't many recreational places to go. Someday, I'm going to write to the mayor and say we need more recreational facilities. Teenagers are so bored. They turn to drugs for fun."

Pootoolik is sitting at the lounge where students grab a snack or two in the evening. It has white walls and furniture badly in need of re-upholstering. While she talks, blaring sounds and intermittent laughter come from the next room where a television set is playing.

Although Iqaluit enjoys general economic prosperity, a federal study predicts that by the year 2025, Inuit people will be living in "Arctic ghettos." The study, called *Lords of the Arctic: Wards of the State*, links the possibility of Arctic slums with the high Iqaluit crime rate.

Ahme Akpik, 24, a carpentry student at the college, says many of his friends have quit school and are resorting to crime. Wearing a faded jean jacket, he speaks with a soft voice as he leans forward, nodding and widening his eyes to stress each point.

"There's only one place to go, the pool hall. There used to be a coffee house that was open every day. Now, it's only open Saturdays. I used to work there myself. It was a lot better then."

Last year, Akpik smoked as much as eight grams of hash a day. But he says he stopped eight months ago and thinks that if the authorities "kicked out all the drugs, that'd improve the town."

Despite by-laws prohibiting liquor sales in Iqaluit, alcohol can be obtained on the black market. The price of one 40-ounce bottle of hard liquor can go as high as \$60 on the street.

Errol Fletcher teaches human development at Arctic College, training students to work in social services. He says most white people from the south live more comfortably than Inuit and his students know it.

"The white population that comes up has good housing and good materials, but the natives don't have those things," he says, noting that for Inuit students, as many as 20 people may be forced to live in a two-bedroom house.

"That kind of crowding situation would discourage people from studying. One group is far more privileged than the other, so that'll cause resentment," he adds.

According to Dalhousie University sociology professor Colin Irwin, who worked on the Wards of the State report, schools in the Arctic do not even provide Inuit students with the skills to fill out an application form and have only hampered their learning of the traditional Inuit lifestyle.

Naullaq Arnaquq, another Arctic College teacher, says that learning English in Iqaluit is difficult when Inuit students do not share the same cultural experiences.

"When I was going to school, they taught us things in Sally, Dick and Jane books that I had never seen before," she says, explaining that even simple sentences about apple trees could baffle students who have never seen trees in Arctic climates.

"I have one friend who doesn't even know how to read yet. She just turned 19," says Pootoolik. "Some of my friends envy me for going higher in education."

While she speaks, a classmate who just walked into the room gives Pootoolik a reproving stare, approaches her and grabs her shoulder, trying to get her attention. She pushes him away, rolling her eyes in exasperation.

The man tries again to get her attention, so Pootoolik finally shoves him aside and he walks away angrily to the adjoining room to watch TV with other students.

Pootoolik says he was harassing her because he didn't want her to be interviewed. As she talks to the reporter about alienation and culture, her classmates are watching Teri Garr and Michael Keaton solve modern suburban problems in a movie called "Mister Mom".

There are trees in the movie. Fletcher contends that education is the path to Inuit progress. "In the long run, it will be the answer, I think. In today's world, you can't escape that."

Fletcher is also optimistic that students can use education as a tool for progress while still maintaining Inuit culture.

"The students here will not see education as important and pass that value on to their kids. They want to preserve things unique in the culture like language. They don't want to lose that."

Arnaquq is equally optimistic about keeping Inuit culture and language alive. "I've heard many young people say their language and culture are important. Of course, we can't go back to the traditional ways, and I don't think we can preserve it orally any more, but we can preserve it, through songs and literature."

