

# Winnipeg's path to reconciling systemic inequity: Acknowledge. Listen. Act.

## How cities can transform to lead the way in combating racism

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**THE PROBLEM:** Many cities struggle to acknowledge and address issues of systemic inequity and legacies of historic racism that impede societal progress and well-being.

**WHY IT MATTERS:** When critical systems – health care, housing, and education – fail to meet the needs of the entire community, municipalities are directly impacted by compounding challenges like families in crisis, homelessness, and crime.

**THE SOLUTION:** Winnipeg publicly acknowledged the problem of racism in the city and sought guidance from community leaders to create and support policies to address it.

Canada's Indigenous population has endured generations of systemic racism resulting from colonialism, the effects of which have been condemned as genocide and have created and bolstered economic, cultural, health, and personal safety crises. These impacts on the Indigenous community are prominent in Winnipeg, which represents Canada's largest urban Indigenous population where more than one in ten Winnipeggers are Indigenous.

Facing the charge as Canada's most racist city in 2015, the Winnipeg municipal government

acknowledged that deep-rooted discrimination against Indigenous people existed. This became a turning point for how the city began a new approach to addressing racism. In Winnipeg, Mayor Brian Bowman, City Council, and public servants directly engaged community leaders to create and support policies to improve community understanding and engage residents and governments at every level.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals require governments to leave no one behind, and the legacy of Winnipeg's history showed significant disparities between Indigenous people and other groups. By looking at and addressing a range of systemic problems, the city would take a key step toward making significant and meaningful change for all its residents.

How did the City of Winnipeg approach this problem? By acknowledging, listening, and taking action.

### 1. Acknowledge

In 2015, at the very beginning of his first term in office, Mayor Bowman and the City of Winnipeg were confronted by a cover story in Maclean's, a high-profile national magazine, that suggested Winnipeg was the most racist city in Canada. Later that same day, the Mayor convened a press conference with Indigenous, academic, and non-governmental organizations and community leaders to begin the difficult, but

most important first step to healing: Acknowledging the problem out loud. This first step was crucial to addressing a profoundly deep-rooted problem because there can be no solution to a problem left unidentified or unacknowledged.

Though Winnipeg had initiatives already underway through its Indigenous Relations Division, this press conference was a first and necessary public acknowledgement of racism by a civic leader standing alongside Indigenous and community leaders.

Acknowledging racism as the leading factor contributing to city challenges was a critical, early step toward making significant and meaningful change for all residents.

## 2. Listen

In moving forward, Mayor Bowman relied on the breadth of experience of anti-racism and equality advocates from across Winnipeg and Canada. A few months after the Maclean's article, the Mayor's Indigenous Advisory Circle (MIAC) was established to advise the Mayor and provide Indigenous perspectives on public policy. MIAC included Indigenous elders and community leaders with national perspectives. Their intimate knowledge and experience would guide key next steps.

MIAC recommended the creation of ONE: The Mayor's National Summit on Racial Inclusion, held in 2015 – the same year Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released 94 Calls to Action, a report detailing steps for all levels of government to lead efforts on reconciliation. The summit took place over two days, included a range of speakers with lived experience, and provided perspectives on racism and opportunities for positive change.

Following a year of community conversation, Mayor Bowman declared 2016 the Year of Reconciliation in Winnipeg. This year of awareness included mandatory reconciliation training for all 10,000 city employees to ensure all public servants heard the truth about the federal government's residential school program and the impact it has had on generations of Canada's Indigenous peoples. Mayor Bowman also visited all high schools in Winnipeg to emphasize the importance of civic engagement, reconciliation, and diversity with the city's youth.

## 3. Take Action

### Stakeholder engagement

With the assistance of MIAC, Mayor Bowman sought to broaden community actions to combat racism.

In 2017, MIAC created the Winnipeg Indigenous Accord (WIA), a movement of voluntary community signatories – business, academic, and non-profit organizations and individuals – who commit and report back annually on their progress on meeting their own goals in support of the TRC's 94 Calls to Action and the 231 Calls to Justice for Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). The WIA was developed through conversations and workshops with youth to help navigate Winnipeg's journey of reconciliation. The WIA has become a catalyst for community action and involvement in reconciliation.

In 2018, Mayor Bowman presented a new platform to voters: The protection and promotion of human rights for all residents including Indigenous peoples. Once re-elected, the new City Council oversaw the expansion of education and civic training programs to include diversity and equity training. The City Council also created Canada's first municipal government Human Rights Committee of Council, an advisory body to Mayor Bowman and City Council on human rights, equity, diversity, peace, access, and disability-related issues and emerging trends impacting Winnipeg's diverse community.

### Policy development

In addition to the WIA, the City of Winnipeg also worked with the Human Rights Committee of Council to create two new policies for action: The Newcomer Welcome and Inclusion Policy and the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Policy and Strategy.

The Newcomer Welcome and Inclusion Policy offers a framework for the City of Winnipeg to better support the settlement and integration of newcomers. It provides guidance on communication, access to city services, anti-oppression training (including anti-racism and cross-cultural competency training) and on developing a more

representative and diverse workforce. Strategic priorities and objectives are identified in the policy as key aspects for implementation by city employees and elected officials and illustrate the importance of a welcoming and inclusive workplace and community that represents the diversity of its people.

The Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Policy and Strategy anchors the City's commitment to promoting human rights; accessibility; equity, diversity, and inclusion; and anti-racism and anti-oppression.

### **Monument and place names**

Finally, one of the most universal challenges for any community is addressing the monuments and place names that symbolize a limited and often biased history. City Council adopted the Welcoming Winnipeg initiative to review place and monument names to help ensure that the contributions, experiences, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples are reflected truthfully in the city's stories, historical markers, and place names.

To date, this has included City Council passing a motion to adopt the Welcoming Winnipeg: Reconciling our History Policy. This policy was developed to guide the city in making decisions regarding requests to create new, add to, or remove/rename historical markers and place names and resolve the absence of Indigenous perspectives, experiences, and contributions in the stories remembered and commemorated. There is a defined process that enables submissions from the community to be reviewed by an independent panel of community leaders who then provide a recommendation to City Council for a final decision on whether to remove, rename, or add historical perspectives.

Looking forward, efforts like the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include measurement tools like the Voluntary Local Reviews, can help highlight areas of improvement governments can address for a healthy city. Reporting on improvement with complex societal issues is challenging and the SDGs provide a method for setting targets and measuring results.

During the last number of years, Winnipeg has transformed from a community that questioned the existence of racism itself to taking substantive actions to combat racism. Canada's journey of reconciliation is ongoing, and Winnipeg is leading the way.

*Curated by Brookings and published in collaboration with Apolitical, these [how-to briefs](#) authored by experienced city government leaders aim to disseminate their innovations to counterparts to accelerate the local delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals. This compendium is part of the SDG Leadership Cities project, a community of practice of vanguard cities promoting a global movement of city leadership on sustainable development. **If you are using this brief to implement an innovation locally, please fill in [this short survey](#) and feel free to contact us at [tpipa@brookings.edu](mailto:tpipa@brookings.edu).***