



Information Sheet

First Nations Child Poverty: A Literature Review and Analysis

January 2016

About the Literature Review

This five-chapter literature review and analysis examines existing research on First Nation child poverty contextualized within the historical and contemporary manifestations of colonialism in Canada. The review begins by describing the data evidencing the deep and persistent impoverishment of First Nations children and their families before moving on to describe frequently used poverty measures and their respective cultural and contextual validity. The review ends by describing some of the promising interventions, including redressing the structural factors that contribute to the alarming over-representation of First Nations children among the poor. Consistent with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) approach, the review privileges pragmatic, community-based and self-determined solutions.

Poverty by Design

Half of First Nations children live in poverty, with the rate rising to 62% in Manitoba and 64% in Saskatchewan. Although the myth that the poor are responsible for their own poverty is particularly virulent in relation to First Nations peoples in Canada, this is far from the truth. There is overwhelming evidence that First Nations poverty is a result of centuries of colonial policy and practice, including starvation, disease, murder, wrongful land and resource expropriation, the reserve system, discriminatory laws, broken treaties, residential schools, child welfare displacement, government underfunding in child welfare and education, and discrimination in the workforce.

Targeting Children

The TRC characterized Canada's residential school policy as "cultural genocide." This policy legalized the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families by government officials for purposes of "education." In most of these schools, children were forced into labour and suffered terrible conditions of poverty, illness, abuse and often death. Most survivors left the schools at a severe social and economic disadvantage, and continued to live in poverty.

Enduring Legacies

Residential schools were the earliest form of Aboriginal child welfare: a system that continues to remove First Nations children from their homes at a staggering rate. Removals today are largely attributed to "neglect," defined as a situation in which children lack adequate clothing, food or shelter; lack basic medical or dental care; or are abandoned. Given the long legacy of impoverishment of First Nations peoples, and the government's ongoing underfunding of essential services for First Nations living on reserves, families are perpetually set up for impoverishment, and thus for losing their children to the state.

The literature review documents these and many other socio-economic impacts of the ongoing impoverishment of First Nations peoples, and criteria necessary for creating meaningful and lasting solutions to this crisis.

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