



INTER GENERATIONAL EFFECTS

In the 1950s, a shift of government focus occurred when amendments to the Indian Act gave provincial authorities jurisdiction over child welfare services without the consent of First Nations governments. The provinces were compensated by the federal government for assuming this responsibility. Subsequent to this transfer of authority, many Indigenous children were removed from their homes without the consent of their families or First Nations governments. The children were put up for adoption and placed with families across Canada and internationally. This is known as the Sixties Scoop.

In 1969, the Department of Indian affairs took over the running of all remaining Indian Residential Schools. Churches and religious communities were no longer involved in their administration. The last schools closed in the 1990s, after over 120 years of the Residential School system being in place. Multiple generations of Indigenous People were deeply affected by their operation and were left without connections to family, community, language and spirituality, resulting in a loss of identity.

In a speech given at Dalhousie University on September 5, 2018, the Honourable Murray Sinclair, former senator and chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission personally expressed his alarm about the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma on Indigenous families: “[Indigenous people] are losing their children to the child welfare system at even higher rates than the Residential Schools took their children away.”[1]

Today, Indigenous children are over-represented in child protection interventions. Statistics Canada reported the 2016 census indicated that 7.7 % of children in Canada aged 0 to 4 are Indigenous. These children account for 51.2% of all children in the same age group in foster care [2]. Many Indigenous youths continue to be separated from their communities and cultures in other ways, as well, contributing to the loss of meaningful connections to their traditional ways of life and barriers to accessing education and skills training. Those living on reserves may even have to travel to another community or to an urban center in order to attend high school. While current high school graduation rates for Indigenous youth have improved, from 57% in 2006 to 70% in 2016, they are still lower than their non-Indigenous counterparts (91% in 2016).

For many Indigenous communities, particularly on reserves and in remote areas, there is an urgent need for improved access to healthcare, housing and economic training compared to others in Canada overall.

Indigenous Peoples all too often experience barriers in access to health care due to jurisdictional gaps in federal and provincial services, as well as discriminatory and racist attitudes. These issues are particularly evident in access to culturally-sensitive healthcare and to mental wellness services. Indigenous communities also experience increased rates of diseases such as diabetes and heart conditions, and some are seeing the return of tuberculosis.

Another area of over-representation is in the justice system, where the general principles of sentencing for Indigenous offenders are not always followed by the Courts. Incarceration rates and recidivism are higher for the Indigenous population, and access to culturally-sensitive rehabilitation and reintegration programs is limited.

Legislation and policies have historically prioritized approaches that originated in Europe and continue to impact Indigenous Peoples in significant ways even today. From the beginning of widespread settlement, European authorities assumed they held decision-making authority over Indigenous Nations, including over their lands, the management of natural resources on their land, and the governance of indigenous peoples themselves. Some Indigenous people were even subjected to forced sterilization as part of provincial eugenics policies. These existed from the early 1900s until 1972 in Alberta and 1973 in British Columbia, although in other provinces such legislation was defeated largely due to Catholic opposition. Even though these provincial sterilization laws were repealed in the 1970s, today we continue to learn through various reports how Indigenous women have been forced or coerced into undergoing sterilization [3].

Canadian authorities have repeatedly failed to address important issues that impact Indigenous Peoples, such as Treaty rights, Aboriginal Title, and the necessary goods of life, like clean drinking water. Discrimination and prejudice routinely affect Indigenous Peoples' ability to access housing, jobs, education, and medical treatment. Indigenous men and women volunteered to serve in WWI, WWII and the Korean War but the benefit extended to non-Indigenous veterans such as land, education, and farm and business loans were either not offered to them or made more difficult to obtain by the erection of bureaucratic barriers. Although there have been inquiries and commissions by the Canadian Government that tell us why and how they have been unjustly treated, Indigenous Peoples still live with the effects of centuries of injustice.

There are cascades of social problems flowing from ongoing discrimination. Broken Treaties and discriminatory policies result in intergenerational trauma, fragmented families, and the separation of Indigenous Peoples from their cultures and spiritualities. This cycle continues today with further intergenerational effects on Indigenous families and communities, where drug and alcohol addictions, violence, and high rates of suicide are prevalent. For example, the occurrence of suicide among First Nations people is three times higher than among non-Indigenous people, and for Inuit the rate goes up to nine times that of non-Indigenous people.

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Recent inquiries, commissions, and court cases, such as the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG, 2016-2019) have brought greater attention to these injustices. The inquiry maintained that colonialism is embedded in government structures and that racial discrimination particularly affects Indigenous women, children, and other vulnerable individuals.

The social doctrine of the Church is clear on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, including their right to self-determination, and on the vital importance of their traditional stewardship of the environment.

"It is clearly the position of the Church that peoples have a right in public life to participate in decisions affecting their lives . . . This is true for everyone. It has particular applications for you as native peoples, in your strivings to take your rightful place among the peoples of the earth, with a just and equitable degree of self-governing. For you a land-base with adequate resources is also necessary for developing a viable economy for present and future generations. You need likewise to be in a position to develop your lands- and your economic potential, and to educate your children and plan your future."

Saint John Paul II, Message to Native Peoples gathered in Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories, 18 September 1984

For Reflection

1. What have been some intergenerational effects of Government policy on Indigenous People?
2. How can the Church and Indigenous Peoples walk together toward healing and reconciliation? What could you do in your own community?

[[1] Murray Sinclair, (speech delivered at the Belong Forum Dalhousie University, [September 6, 2018])

[2] Statistics Canada, "Census in Brief: Diverse family characteristics of Aboriginal children aged 0 to 4."

<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016020/98-200-x2016020-eng.cfm> (accessed December 6, 2021).

[3] Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, "Past and Present: Forced Sterilization of Indigenous

Women in Canada," in Forced and Coerced Sterilization of Persons in Canada. Standing Senate Committee

Report, June 3, 2021, 17-22.

https://www.sencanada.ca/content/sen/committee/432/RIDR/reports/2021-06-03_ForcedSterilization_E.pdf (accessed December 6, 2021).