

Information Sheet

First Nations Child Poverty: A Literature Review and Analysis Summary of Chapter One

First Nations Child & Family
Caring Society of Canada



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Introduction: Echoes of Colonialism in First Nations Child Poverty

Poverty Rates Highest in Canada

Poverty rates for First Nations children on reserves across Canada are currently 60%, with these rates increasing to 69% in Saskatchewan and 76% in Manitoba.¹ Devastating poverty rates for First Nations children are, sadly, not new, and have been known to the public and policy makers for decades. This chapter provides a brief overview of the historical and contemporary causes of First Nations child poverty. It also outlines the two main streams of research in this area and discusses reasons for focusing on the structural determinants of impoverishment for First Nation children.

Two Streams of Research

Research on First Nations poverty in Canada falls into two main streams. One stream focuses on personal socio-economic factors (such as education levels, job skills, and attitudes), arguing that the solution to the poverty gap lies in increasing individual participation in the market economy (assimilation). The other stream focuses on structural determinants of First Nations poverty, including colonial history, chronic underfunding, and ongoing colonial policies that restrict political autonomy, self-determination, access to traditional lands and cultural renewal. This literature review focuses on the second research stream, since the evidence pointing to past and present structural

determinants of poverty for First Nations peoples is overwhelming. Although researchers focusing on structural determinants often differ on how best to end First Nations child poverty (Chapter 5), all agree there is an urgent need to improve the quality of life and life chances of First Nations children.

Colonial Policy Targets Aboriginal Children

The colonial underpinnings of First Nations child poverty existed prior to confederation, but the formation of the Canadian state signaled a more aggressive targeting of colonial policy towards Aboriginal² children through the residential school system. In residential schools, Aboriginal children were underfed and over worked, and lived in impoverished and unhealthy conditions, dying from tuberculosis at exceedingly high rates from the early 1900s until well into the 1950s. Despite recommendations made by the government's own Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce, the government refused to spend the small amount of money (\$15,000) it would cost to stop the spread of the disease and save lives. This pattern of refusing to spend the money needed to ensure the health and well being of First Nations children persists, despite the availability of solutions, the strength of the Canadian economy, and the 2016 ruling by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, which ordered the federal government to provide immediate relief to First Nations children on reserves. (2016 CHRT 2)

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¹ Numbers are from the most recent report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives: *Shameful Neglect: Indigenous Child Poverty in Canada*, 2016.

² The term Aboriginal includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis; all Aboriginal children were targets of the residential school system.