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First Nations Child &
Family Caring Society

Paying for Discrimination or Investing to End It: The Cost of Ignoring First Nations Led Solutions

If the Canadian government had acted on evidence-based, First Nations-led solutions to address severe inequities in First Nations children's services when they were clearly identified decades ago, First Nations children would not have lost their lives, families, and childhoods—and Canada would not now be paying **$23.4 billion** in compensation for preventable harm. That sum reflects the cost of government inaction, not investment.

The chart shows what $23.4 billion could have contributed if invested to address the structural inequities that drive child welfare involvement, including housing, water, infrastructure, health, and education. Addressing these conditions would have reduced removals and kept more children safely at home. Learn more about the Spirit Bear Plan to end inequalities for First Nations children. Canada now risks repeating the same mistake by sidelining the First Nations-led Loving Justice plan in favour of its own far less rigorous approach to permanently end the discrimination substantiated by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal in 2016. Ignoring First Nations-led solutions does not save money; it defers and multiplies costs while harm continues.

The choice is clear: invest now to end discrimination or pay far more later for its consequences—with children paying the price in the meantime.

Funding use equivalent	Estimated cost of completed outcome	Number of complete outcomes funded with $23.4 billion	What that outcome means in real terms for First Nations children and families	Structural condition addressed	Elements that trigger child welfare involvement which would be reduced
Full water and wastewater system upgrades for all First Nations communities in Canada	$15 to $25 billion	Approximately one full national build-out	Drinking water treatment plants, wastewater treatment systems, distribution networks, operator training, maintenance funding and climate resilience upgrades for approximately 634 First Nation communities, serving all on-reserve residents.	Systemic underfunding of basic public health infrastructure	Communtiy-wide safety alerts; health-driven child welfare involvement linked to environmental conditions beyond family control
Elimination of all long-term drinking water advisories on First Nations reserves	$675 million	N/A	Every long-term drinking water advisory in First Nation communities could be eliminated, with capital construction and long-term operations and maintenance.	Chronic infrastructure neglect and unsafe living environments	Health and safety concerns in the home; emergency investigations related to unsafe water, sanitation and illness risks
Full infrastructure upgrade on-reserve housing (new construction, major & minor repairs and long-term operations and maintenance)	$135.1 billion	Approximately 17% of a complete national housing system rebuild	Construction of new homes, repair or replacement of unsafe units, and sustained maintenance across virtually all First Nations communities, improving housing conditions for tens of thousands of families	Decades of systemic underinvestment resulting in overcrowing, unsafe housing and rapid deterioration	Overcrowding-based investigations; repeat involvement linked to mold, fire risk, heating failures and unsafe living conditions; removels driven by housing standards families cannnot meet due to lack of state investment

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Construction of new on-reserve housing units	$450,000 to $500,000 per home	Approximately 46,000 to 52,000 new homes	Enough new housing to accomodate approximately 180,000 to 210,000 people, substantially reducing overcrowding and unsafe housing conditions	Severe housing shortages and chronic overcrowding	Investigations triggered by overcrowding, unsafe sleeping arrangements, and non-compliance with space and safety standards
Major and minor repairs to existing on-reserve homes	Approximately $400,000 per home	All required repairs nationwide	Structural repairs, mold remeditation, mechanical system replacement, and safety upgrades for approximately 56,000 existing housing units.	Housing deterioration due to lack of maintenance funding	Reccurent child welfare involvement related to mold, heating failures, fire risks and building safety concerns
Climate adaptation for community infrastructure and housing	$30.9 billion	Approximately 197 adaptation projects nationally	Children remain safely housed during floods, fires, evacuations and boil-water events; emergency displacement no longer becomes grounds for removal	Insufficient investment in infrastructure needed to withstand predictable climate and environmental events	Safety-based investigations and emergency interventions during floods, fires, and other climate-related events
Complete First Nations education infrastructure program	$12.6 billion for the full program	100% of identified needs	Construction, replacement, expansion and long-term maintenance of approximately 391 on-reserve schools, including essential teacher housing	Long-term underinvestment in community infrastructure and services	Increased surveillance and reporting associated with lack of stable education, childcare and family support infrastructure
Construction of new First Nations elementary or secondary schools	$25 to $30 million per school	Approximately 780 to 930 new school buildings	Far more than required to replace every overcrowded or unsafe on-reserve school, including schools lost to fire, condemnation or chronic undercapacity.	Inadequate and unsage public facilities	Service disruptions and institutional instability that often coincide with increased child welfare oversight
Construction of teacher housing units in First Nations communities	Approximately $350,000 per unit	Approximately 66,000 teacher housing units	Elimination of teacher housing shortages in remote and northern communities, making staffing schools feasible long-term	Remoteness compounded by instrastructure gaps	Service instability, inconsistent school operation, and reporting linked to lack of sustained professional presence
All season road access to First Nations communities	$35.5 billion	Replacement of approximately 8,000 km of winter roads	Families can reliably access healthcare, schools, food, housing repairs and mandated services; emergencies are responded to on time.	Geographic isolation that produces enforced poverty and false findings of non compliance	Child welfare findings associated with limited access to services, medical care, emergency response, and consistent school attendance.
High-Speed digital connectivity (broadband and mobility)	$5.2 billion	Universal access in approximately 748 communities	Families can attend viritual health and child-welfare appointments, children can attend virtual school; service access becomes possible rather than conditional	Systemic lack of digital infrastructure that limits access to public services	Service participation concerns, including school attendance and required meeting attendance, affected by limited digital access.
Accessibility retrofits in homes and community buildings	$1.6 billion	100% of retrofits needed	Children with disabilities, elders and caregivers can remain safely at home	Inaccessible housing conditions that place disproportionate caregiving strain on families with disabilities	Findings related to inability to provide care associated with inaccessible housing conditions.