

# Information Sheet

## *First Nations Child Poverty: A Literature Review and Analysis*

### Summary of Chapter Two

First Nations Child & Family  
Caring Society of Canada



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## **Chapter 2 – Poverty by Design: The Canadian Government’s Master Project**

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This chapter situates First Nations child poverty within the practices and policies devised by colonial administrators to gain increasing access to First Nations territories, and the resources therein, through the deliberate impoverishment and forced assimilation of First Nations peoples.

### **Land loss, displacement, assimilation, and forced dependence**

Prior to colonization, First Nations peoples had well-developed economic systems based on principles of sustainability, inter-tribal trade, and egalitarian distribution of resources. In the early 1600s, First Nations peoples began trading with Europeans; eventually, many restructured their economies around the fur trade, where they played a vital role. As the commercial fur trade waned, and First Nations peoples lost access to traditional territories and resources through government expropriation of land, the colonial administration employed numerous tactics to further reduce First Nations’ territories, displacing many onto “Indian reserves,” largely located on marginal land ‘owned’ and governed by the Crown.

The *Indian Act* of 1876 intensified control over First Nations by granting the newly-formed Government of Canada jurisdiction over all matters pertaining to those they deemed “status Indians,” and by escalating earlier assimilation attempts through further impoverishment tactics. For example, the *Indian Act* placed restrictions on land use, self-government, travel off reserves, and who was eligible for “Indian

status.” First Nations peoples were forced to forfeit band membership if they worked off reserve, attended secondary or post-secondary school, joined the military, became Christian ministers, or, for First Nations women (prior to 1985), married a man without Indian status. The *Indian Act* also made the Government of Canada responsible for on-reserve infrastructure and services, including housing, education, health care, social assistance, and child welfare, which it consistently underfunded (and still does) as a method of further impoverishing First Nations peoples and inducing assimilation.

### **Residential Schools: The economics of stealing children**

By the late 1800s, Canada emboldened its assimilation plan by removing First Nations and other Indigenous children from their families and placing them in Christian-run residential schools. Chronically underfunded by the government, the schools extracted labour from the children in attempts to self-sustain. Children faced dire conditions of poverty within the schools, where they were inadequately housed, clothed, and fed, and where many suffered devastating physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. These conditions led to appalling rates of illness and death in the schools, and most survivors left with an education that prepared them only for low-paying manual labour jobs. The ability of survivors to earn a living was further compromised by the trauma of abuse and neglect they experienced in the schools; by long-term separation from their families, cultures, and languages; and by workplace discrimination.

**Read the full chapter here:** [\*First Nations Child Poverty: A Literature Review and Analysis\*](#)