



Information Sheet: Structural Interventions in Child Welfare

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Structural Risk Factors

Structural risks are factors that place children and families at risk that are largely beyond their ability to control such as poverty, poor housing, historical disadvantage and inequitable access to services. For example, racial discrimination against First Nation peoples in Canada is rooted in the historical context of colonization and the residential school system. The Indian Act has governed relations between the government and First Nations in Canada since the confederation of Canada in 1867 (Milloy, 1999; Government of Canada, 2013). The Indian Act is race-based legislation that has institutionalized historical racism in federal public policy affecting First Nation peoples in Canada (Milloy, 1999). Structural racism (e.g. in education, health, employment, economic) continues to this day and denies or delays opportunities to First Nation peoples that are available to non-Aboriginal Canadians (McLoyd, 1988). Historical and structural racism are intimately linked to poverty (McLoyd, 1988).

Research confirms that neglect fueled by structural risk factors, such as poverty and poor housing, contributes to the over-representation of First Nation children and youth in foster care (Trocmé, *et al*, 2005). Two sub-types of neglect that are most frequently correlated with poverty, failure to supervise and failure to provide essential care, account for the largest portion of neglect reports. Studies also link the high rates of substance misuse to first-generation and intergenerational trauma caused by the residential school system (Hart, Sinclair & Bruyere, 2009; Milloy, 1999; Trocmé, *et al*, 2005).

According to the Statistics Canada *National Household Survey* (2013), 48% of 30,000 children in foster care are

Aboriginal children (First Nation, Métis & Inuit), even though Aboriginal peoples account for only 4.3% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2013). The *Canadian Incidence Study on Child Abuse and Neglect* found that First Nation children were 11.4 times more likely to be placed in informal care and 12.4 times more likely to be placed in formal foster care placement than other children (Sinha, *et al*, 2011; pp. 81).

The structural drivers of poverty, poor housing and inequitable service access linked to neglect make the attribution of the responsibility for the risk to the child a challenge (Turpel-Lafond, 2009; Trocmé, *et al*, 2005). Too often child welfare risk assessment tools/processes codify structural risks as family deficits without adequately considering whether the families can reasonably address the problems. So how can structural risk factors be addressed to better support and protect First Nation children and their families in Canada?

What does structural intervention mean?

Structural interventions are programs/services targeted to reducing the impact of structural risks. The parable of the river is a helpful story to illustrate the importance of structural interventions. There once was a village on the edge of a river where life was good. One day a villager noticed a child floating down the river and they jumped in to save them. The next day there were two children, and the villager called for help and jumped in to save them as well. But eventually there were so many children floating down the river that the whole village became involved in rescuing the children. They had a watch tower and rescue shifts that went all day and all night. Until one day when one villager said, "But where are all these children coming from? Let us organize a team and go up river." So half of



the villagers stayed to rescue children from the water, and the other half went to find the cause of the problem upstream. By not addressing the structural risk factors upstream in child protection, it means that more children will continue to get caught in the river current, who may or may not be rescued by the villagers downstream (Blackstock, *et al.*, 2006; Lundy, 2004).

The lack of specific recognition of structural risks in child welfare legislation makes it challenging to incorporate structural interventions in practice in the context of child safety; however, it is important that child welfare workers are able to differentiate between family risk and structural risk, and respond meaningfully to both (Blackstock, *et al.*, 2006).

For example, consider a mother of three children who only has enough money to pay for rent or food, but not both. In Canada, lone-parent families are most at risk for low-income, with 8 out of 10 lone-parent families headed by women (Statistics Canada, 2012). If the mother chooses to pay rent to keep a roof over her family's heads, her children could be removed for reasons of neglect for not having enough nutritious food for her children. She also risks losing her children if she chooses to buy food, and she and her family end up losing their home for not paying rent.

Promising practices from child welfare agencies in Canada and the United States, demonstrate that centering structural risks in child welfare practice and services can have positive economic and social benefits.

Promising Structural Interventions: Housing

The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (2013) recommends that citizens spend 30% or less of their household income on housing in order to ensure that there are enough funds to meet other needs, such as food, clothing, utilities, internet, school supplies, and recreation. Under current Canadian child welfare policy guidelines (varies between regions), children may be taken into care if the worker determines significant risk to child safety due

to living conditions (Turpel-Lafond, 2009). As a result, families are not being adequately supported in accessing affordable and secure housing in order to live together and care for each other.

Inadequate housing is a structural risk factor that is often correlated with poverty; consequently, it is difficult for parents to change in the short term particularly as the quality and affordability of housing is largely dependent on decisions made by governments and private developers. Between 2002 and 2012, rates of mildew in First Nations housing increased from 44% to 50.9% (Campaign 2000, 2012). In situations where safe housing is not accessible, the development of safe and affordable housing options, and/or connecting clients to housing option resources, would be a structural intervention that reduces the rates of psychological and emotional harm caused by the unnecessary removal of a child from the home.

Under the Article 7 of Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) in Canada, every citizen has a right to security of the person. That means safe, secure, and affordable housing options (Lightman, 2003; Lundy, 2004).

The National Centre for Housing and Child Welfare promotes progressive funding and program approaches to address homelessness and inadequate housing for families coming to the attention of child welfare agencies in the USA. For example, in 1990 the US Family Unification Program (FUP) was implemented to provide housing vouchers to families, or youth aging out of the program, who are at risk of homelessness (White, 2013). In 2009, FUP provided \$20 million in housing vouchers to families or youth involved in the child welfare system who were signaled as eligible by child welfare agencies (White, 2013). An evaluation of the Family Unification Program in the U.S. of 16, 000 families in 31 sites indicates that participants were able to achieve high levels of family preservation and reunification, and housing stability. At the time of the evaluation, 85 percent of families were in stable housing for a year after the program, 90 percent of at-risk families were able to stay together, and 62 percent of families in need of reunification were together (The National Center

on Family Homelessness (2011). If you would like to learn more please visit <http://www.nchcw.org/>.

This approach in the US illustrates the use of structural interventions in the context of child safety, because child safety often means family safety.

In Canada, Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST) offers Aboriginal Women and Children's Apartments for women between the ages of 16-30 who have children up to age 16, and are in need of secure and a culturally-based living environment (NCFST, 2011). Apartments are based on family size, include large furniture (bed & kitchen appliances), and rent is based on family size and the amount social assistance received (NCFST, 2011). Stays can last up to 18 months, and the agency provides programming and support services to assist the families achieve a permanent housing solution. NCFST also has a Family Support Team dedicated to providing Aboriginal children and families with support and advocacy services necessary to achieve a healthy quality of life (NCFST, 2011).

Programs like the Women and Children's Apartments provide short term support so that families can stay together while working towards more permanent, healthy solutions. These two examples clearly demonstrate that child welfare can take steps to reduce the numbers of children being placed in child welfare care by providing targeted housing programs for families in need.

Promising Structural Interventions: Substance Misuse

The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse (CIS-2008) identified drug and alcohol abuse as the 5th and 4th most common risk factors for child maltreatment in Canada (Public Health Agency, 2010). The child welfare system will be better able to proactively protect the health and well-being of families, and prevent potential child maltreatment, if appropriate substance misuse resources are available and accessible to families. One of the first

steps is strengthening training and identification skills of management and front-line workers in both fields of substance misuse intervention and child welfare to facilitate understanding and collaboration between service providers (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Improved training and awareness will also reduce the stigma around substance misuse to increase workers comfort and ability to identify and address it as a structural risk factor for child safety and better support the family (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Substance misuse and child welfare workers must be able to work constructively together to better respect and meet the need of children and their families (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

In the United States, approximately 50% of cases of child neglect and abuse involve parental substance abuse (Breshears, Yeh & Young, 2009). Within this group, 40-60% of those who engage in treatment demonstrated a decrease in substance use and/or abuse. For this to work, treatment must be available, accessible, and customized to the individual (Breshears, Yeh & Young, 2009). It is important for child welfare workers to be honest and transparent with families regarding their substance use and its implications, and help connect those in need to available and culturally appropriate resources.

Understanding Substance Abuse and Facilitating Recovery: A Guide for Child Welfare Workers (Breshears, Yeh & Young, 2009) outlines tools and skills useful for better supporting substance abuse treatment and recovery in the context of child safety.

Foxvalley Counselling Services and the Saskatchewan Ministry for Social Services have partnered to provide an innovative Talking Circle program (Government of Saskatchewan, 2012). Children and their families, community members, and child welfare workers are brought to the table to develop alternative, culturally-based solutions in the best interests, short- and long-term, of the child and their family. The program aims to support the development of more co-operative and transparent relationships between child welfare workers

and families involved in child protection (Government of Saskatchewan, 2012).

Child welfare workers are the ones who directly interact with children and their families, so it is important that they can identify substance misuse as a structural risk factor, and have the necessary tools, skills, and knowledge of appropriate and culturally relevant community resources to address substance misuse and support treatment in the context of child safety.

Promising Structural Interventions: Poverty

As stated in the introduction, poverty is a leading structural risk factor in the apprehension of First Nation children into care, particularly in cases of child neglect (Duva & Mtezger, 2010; Sinha, *et al*, 2011; Turpel-Lafond, 2009; Trocmé, *et al*, 2005). In the *Kiskisik Awasisak* study on the over-representation of First Nation children in care, 27.7 cases of substantiated child maltreatment were categorized as neglect per 1,000 First Nation children in the geographic area of the child welfare agencies examined, making it the primary category of maltreatment (Sinha, *et al*, 2011). Research has found that the stress associated with living in poverty can increase parenting difficulties and negatively affect parents' ability to meet their children's needs (Duva & Mtezger, 2010). The challenge in poverty of meeting day-to-day needs can cause feelings of anxiety, depression, fearfulness and being overwhelmed, all of which can undermine parenting capacity (Duva & Metzger, 2010).

The contributors to, and conditions of, poverty can be challenged through the pursuit of a more equal and equitable society. In the book, *The Spirit Level* (2010), it is argued that more equal societies benefit everyone, not just those with low-income. Through their research, the author's identified that more equal societies are more likely to be healthy, have a better education, a more productive workforce, a higher quality of life for the overall population compared to countries with steeper inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Equality should be pursued in

partnership with equity to ensure fairness and social justice.

In Australia and New Zealand, there are micro-loans with low-interest rates available to assist individuals and families with low-incomes to pay for day-to-day essentials. This is a promising practice in addressing structural risk factors related to poverty. The program is offered by Australia and New Zealand Banking Group (ANZ), National Australian Bank (NAB) and their charitable community partners offer feasible options to help people build their assets and sort out their finances without falling further behind (Corrigan, 2006). These initiatives were developed in response to 'pay-day' lenders that further harm people in difficult financial situations with interest rates that have been recorded as high as 48% (Corrigan, 2006).

The micro-loan initiatives in Canada largely support entrepreneurship and are available to low-income individuals without credit history, steady employment, or the collateral necessary for traditional loans (Ontario, 2012). Ontario has a program to support micro-lending programs for women (Ontario, 2012). The program is meant to provide the funds to increase knowledge of micro-lending and establish micro-lending programs to support women in establishing their own businesses. This Ontario grant project does not provide funds directly to individuals but aims to support the introduction and development of community-based, micro-lending programs in Ontario (Ontario, 2012). While this program focuses on microloans for low-income women trying to start their own businesses, it would also be beneficial to learn from the programs in Australia and New Zealand that provide loans to pay for day-to-day essentials to support the quality of life of children and families. For example, banks providing microloans with little to no interest so that parent(s) can buy a washer and dryer so that they can stay with their children in the home while they do their family's laundry.

When we talk about the rate of child poverty, it is easy to forget that child poverty is family poverty. Parents must have access to adequate and appropriate socio-economic

opportunities in order to support a quality of life for themselves and their families. There is no measure for poverty in Canada, but low-income is measured using the Low-Income Cut-offs (LICO) and the Market Basket Measure (MBM) (Campaign 2000, 2012; Lightman, 2003).

Family Service Toronto hosts Campaign 2000: A campaign to end child and family poverty in Canada, and produce reports that highlight key policy changes that could reduce child and family poverty in Canada. The following recommendations are from the *2012 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty*. Increasing the Canadian Child Tax Benefit (CCTB) to \$5,400 annually, along with improving access to full-time employment with a livable wage, and improve social conditions and socio-economic opportunities of Aboriginal peoples to at least equal to non-Aboriginal Canadians (Campaign 2000, 2012).

The employment rate for Aboriginal peoples is 65.8% in contrast to 85.6% for non-Aboriginal peoples (Campaign 2000, 2012). The employment rate does not speak to whether employment is full-time, part-time or casual, or if they are earning a livable (rather than minimum) wage. Further research is needed on how to better provide equitable socio-economic opportunities for stable employment on- and off- reserve that are culturally appropriate and that will be sustainable in the long-term.

The Way Forward

The over-representation of First Nation children and youth in the child welfare system is related to the structural risk factors of housing, substance misuse, and the socio-economic conditions and opportunities of First Nation peoples in Canada (Turpel-Lafond, 2009; Hart, Sinclair & Bruyere, 2009; Milloy, 1999; Trocmé, *et al*, 2005). Poverty, substance misuse, and housing issues are complex and challenging to address in child welfare, but not impossible.

Promising practices, like Native Child and Family Services of Toronto women's housing program, Foxvalley Counselling Services Talking Circles and the micro-loans in

New Zealand and Australia, among others, illustrate alternative approaches to practice that can lead to positive innovations in child welfare policy, cross-agency collaboration, and culturally-based equity in child welfare and protection that are already being done. Innovative approaches in child welfare are necessary to better meet the unique needs of First Nation children and families, and to better support the growth and development of future generations. We have to look upstream, and take action in the form of structural interventions, in order to have a significant impact on the over-representation of First Nation children in care.

If you are interested in learning more about what you can do in your community, please see the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society's Publications and Resources at www.fncaringsociety.com/publications or see the list of sources.

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