



## An Uncaring State? The Overrepresentation of First Nations Children in the Canadian Welfare System

### Key Details

#### KEY WORDS

First Nations youth, Aboriginal youth, child welfare

#### POPULATION GROUP

First Nations youth

#### STEPPING UP THEMES

Health and Wellness

#### RESEARCH ORIGIN

Canada

#### SOURCE

Academic Article (peer reviewed)

### 1. What is the research about?

This editorial article examines the inadequacies of the provincial and federal governments in addressing the overrepresentation of First Nations children in the child welfare system. Child welfare involvement has been shown to negatively impact children in multiple ways. Aboriginal youth represent nearly 50% of the children and youth under government care, while representing only 5% of the population. A drastic, comprehensive shift must occur to address the root causes of this gross overrepresentation. This editorial was printed by the Canadian Mental Health Association Journal because it is the opinion of the authors that physicians who work from a social determinants of health perspective and who must respond to the life-long health effects associated with underfunding, can serve as advocates for equitable services for First Nations peoples.

### 2. Where did the research take place?

This article addresses systemic inequality in service provision for First Nations children, youth, families and communities across Canada.

### 3. Who is this research about?

This article is about First Nations children involved in the Child Welfare System. The authors refer only to “First Nations” as defined in the Indian Act. Therefore, this article does not address the situation of Metis and Inuit people.

### 4. How was the research done?

This article is an editorial review that engages the current status of the root causes of the overrepresentation of First Nations youth in the child welfare system.

The authors discuss the decision-making powers of the provincial, territorial and federal governments, as well as the historical context that contributes to the socio-economic realities of First Nations families, which leads to vulnerabilities to child welfare involvement.

### 5. What are the key findings?

Engagement with child welfare systems has been proven to increase the risk for: “homelessness, mental health issues, substance use, incarceration and unplanned pregnancies.” Despite the myriad of research demonstrating this link, policy makers have failed to develop strategies resulting in any meaningful change. The Federal government is responsible for funding and providing services on-reserve and provinces

**“According to tradition, [children] are gifts from the spirit world and have to be treated very gently lest they become disillusioned with this world and return to a more congenial place.”**

are responsible for child welfare and services off-reserve. The funding formula for both prevention and intervention services for First Nations families, both on and off reserve is outdated and insufficient. Canada's decentralized government and multiple jurisdictions have resulted in inconsistent policies and situations where responsibility is difficult to determine.

Overall, First Nations children receive 22% less funding support for social services than non-First Nations children. The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada filed a human rights complaint against the Government of Canada, citing the inequity in funding as discrimination against First Nations children. According to the authors, this discrimination is a contributing factor to the overrepresentation of First Nations children in the child welfare system.

For Indigenous families, child welfare involvement stems most often from issues of neglect, not abuse. Structural inequalities, such as poverty, instable housing, and food insecurity often masquerade as abuse. An understanding of the impacts of ongoing colonization, including residential schools and the "Sixties Scoop" is integral to addressing the difficult context in which Indigenous families exist.

## 6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

It is clear that the current approach, both in terms of funding and spirit, is failing First Nations children; drastic systemic changes are necessary to bring the quality of services for First Nations children up to acceptable standards. The current structure for providing services to First Nations youth, families and communities is inadequate and perpetuates, rather than redresses systemic inequities.

The authors of this review, along with Aboriginal activists, advocate for investing in prevention rather than intervention strategies. Furthermore, they suggest a variety of additional strategies to address inequitable health and life outcomes:

1. Establish of a national steering committee to monitor national trends for both First Nations and non-First Nations children involved in the child welfare system that will be able to determine the most effective intervention points.
2. Conduct comprehensive longitudinal research to identify factors driving the high prevalence of neglect charges amongst First Nations families.
3. Invest in services and programming designed and delivered by First Nations communities.
4. Invest in initiatives to strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal professional organizations.



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