



Pathways to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care¹

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Disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal children in care

Aboriginal children are disproportionately represented in foster care in Canada. Data from provincial and territorial ministries of child and family services for 2000–2002 suggest that 30% to 40% of children and youth placed in out-of-home care during those years were Aboriginal,² yet Aboriginal children made up less than 5% of the total child population in Canada.³ The number of First Nations children from reserves placed in out-of-home care grew rapidly between 1995 and 2001, increasing by 71.5%.⁴ In Manitoba, Aboriginal children made up nearly 80% of children living in out-of-home care in 2000.⁵

The reasons for this overrepresentation are unclear but a growing number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations are beginning to address the issue. Internationally, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has raised concerns regarding the disproportionate risks faced by Aboriginal children in Canada and called for strengthened efforts to address the inequalities that these children are facing.⁶

Government policy of assimilation

Historically, Canadian government policies were designed to assimilate Aboriginal children.⁷ For more than a century, schooling for Aboriginal children from reserves was provided primarily by church-run and government-funded residential schools, where assimilation efforts included forbidding children to speak their own language and to practice their cultural and spiritual traditions.⁸ Contact with parents was often limited and many residential schools were located far from reserves. Siblings were sometimes separated in

residences, sexual and physical abuse have been widely reported, and many children died from disease and malnutrition.⁹ One unfortunate legacy of residential schools is that many children did not have an opportunity to observe healthy parental role models. In fact, the opposite was frequently the case and residential school survivors have reported diminished capacity to care for their own children.¹⁰ Education for on-reserve Aboriginal children gradually moved away from residential schools to community schools and the last residential school in Canada closed in 1996.¹¹

The introduction of provincial and territorial child welfare services to reserve communities in the 1950s and 1960s effectively continued an assimilationist policy through the removal of Aboriginal children from their cultures and communities and their adoption into non-Aboriginal families. Such adoptions were common until the 1980s. Over 11,132 Aboriginal children with Indian status were adopted between 1960 and 1990.¹²

More Aboriginal children in out-of-home care

Current policies tend to support Aboriginal families and communities in exercising more control over the welfare of Aboriginal children than was the case in the past. Nevertheless, it appears that the number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care continues to rise. By 2003, there were more Aboriginal children living in out-of-home care than there were in residential schools at the height of the residential school movement.¹³ Of particular concern is the national trend toward placing growing numbers of Aboriginal children in group or institutional care.¹⁴

Canadian Incidence Study and Aboriginal families

The 1998 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect¹⁵ (CIS-1998) is the first national survey on the nature and extent of reported child maltreatment. Among other things, the CIS-1998 compares placement rates for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal¹⁶ children who were reported for maltreatment and assessed by child protection workers. Table 1 shows that Aboriginal children were formally placed in out-of-home care at more than twice the rate of non-Aboriginal children (9.9% vs. 4.6%) between October 1 and December 31, 1998, which is the period that data was collected for the CIS. Informal placements, such as placing the child with grandparents or other kin, were more than three times higher for Aboriginal children. Adding in cases in which placement plans were still being considered, a total of 25% of Aboriginal children were removed or were being considered for removal from their homes, compared with 10.4% of non-Aboriginal children. The high placement rate for Aboriginal children raises some important questions.

Table 1. Placement rates by Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal status

Type of placement	Aboriginal (%) (n=831)	non-Aboriginal (%) (n=3,563)
Formal child welfare placement	9.9%	4.6%
Informal placement	11.2%	3.4%
Placement considered	3.9%	2.4%
No placement required	75.1%	89.6%

Source: CIS-1998

Placement and family disadvantage

The CIS-1998 data indicate that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children did not differ significantly in most child functioning variables, such as depression or anxiety. On the other hand, differences were found between the socioeconomic conditions of the families and problems related to the primary caregivers. Aboriginal families were more often dependent on social assistance and lived in unsafe housing. They were more likely to have moved multiple times in the year prior to the survey. Compared to non-Aboriginal families, Aboriginal families were more likely to have had previous child welfare case openings and proportionately more of these cases involved neglect. Alcohol abuse was a concern for almost two-thirds of the Aboriginal parents, compared to 22% of non-Aboriginal parents. Drug abuse, criminal activity, cognitive impairment, and lack of social support were more common among Aboriginal parents.

When the differences between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families were taken into consideration, the CIS-1998 found no difference in the likelihood of placement for Aboriginal children compared to non-Aboriginal children. In other words, rates of placement for Aboriginal children were similar to the rates for non-Aboriginal children in families facing similar difficulties. For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families, the chances of a child being placed out of the family home were higher when the child had two or more behavioral concerns and when families:

- were two-parent blended or single parent
- had made two or more moves in the year prior to the survey
- had a part-time rather than full-time income
- had parents with cognitive impairments or alcohol concerns
- had parents who had experienced maltreatment when they were children
- had parents with suspected or confirmed criminal activity.

This finding suggests that decisions made by child welfare workers might not be as strongly influenced by race as might be assumed at first glance from the rates of overrepresentation. It should be noted, however, that the study could not control for influence of race on social workers' perceptions of child, parent and home characteristics. For example, it is possible that social workers would be more likely to report an Aboriginal parent for substance abuse than a non-Aboriginal parent, due to stereotyping.

Solutions to family hardship needed

Analysis of the CIS-1998 data suggests that a complex set of factors underlies the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the Canadian child welfare system. Solutions to the problems that lead to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in child welfare are needed from a variety of service sectors. As a beginning, shifting control of child welfare services to Aboriginal communities should help in the development of services that are more appropriate to the needs of Aboriginal children and families. However, such a shift may not result in a significant decrease in admission rates until broader social problems that undermine parents' abilities to care adequately for their children are addressed.

- 1 This information sheet is based on the peer-reviewed article, Trocmé, N., Knoke, D., & Blackstock, C. (2004). Pathways to overrepresentation of aboriginal children in Canada's child welfare system. *Social Services Review*, 78(4), 577–601.
- 2 Farris-Manning, C., & Zandstra, M. (2003). *Children in Care in Canada: A Summary of Current Issues and Trends with Recommendations for Future Research*. Position paper. Ottawa, ON: Child Welfare League of Canada.
- 3 Statistics Canada. (1996). *Growing Up in Canada: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada.
- 4 McKenzie, B. (2002). *Block Funding Child Maintenance in First Nations Child and Family Services: A Policy Review*. Unpublished manuscript. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Kahnawake Shakotiiia'takenhas Community Services.
- 5 Aboriginal Justice Inquiry—Child Welfare Initiative (AJI-CWI). (2001). *Promise of Hope: Commitment to Change: Child and Family Services in Manitoba Canada*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Executive Committee of the AJI-CWI. Available at <http://www.aji-cwi.mb.ca/pdfs/promiseofhope.pdf>
- 6 United Nations. (2003, September 19). *Committee on the Rights of the Child Holds a Day of Discussion on the Rights of Indigenous Children*. News release. Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations.
- 7 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. (1996). *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Ottawa, ON: Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Milloy, J. (1999). *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press.
- 10 Bennett, M., & Blackstock, C. (2002). *A Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography Focusing on Aspects of Aboriginal Child Welfare in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada.
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- 12 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. (1996). *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Ottawa, ON: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.
- 13 Blackstock, C. (2003). First Nations child and family services restoring peace and harmony in First Nations communities. In K. Kufeldt & B. McKenzie (Eds.), *Child Welfare: Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice*, (pp. 331–342). Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- 14 McKenzie, B. (2002). *Block Funding Child Maintenance in First Nations Child and Family Services: A Policy Review*. Unpublished manuscript. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Kahnawake Shakotiiia'takenhas Community Services.
- 15 Trocmé, N., MacLaurin, B., Fallon, B., Daciuk, J., Billingsley, D., Tourigny, M., et al. (2001). *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect: Final Report*. Ottawa, ON: Health Canada.
- 16 The ethno-racial groups that were compared in the CIS-1998 analysis on which this report is based were Aboriginal and white. Data categories for ethno-racial groups were based on the Statistics Canada 1996 long questionnaire census categories. In this information sheet, the term “non-Aboriginal” refers to people who were categorized as “white.”

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