

What does the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report summary say about the Indian Residential School (IRS) system and child welfare?

Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is available at http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec_Summary_2015_05_31_web_o.pdf

What is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada?

The TRC was established in 2008 pursuant to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which was reached in 2006 and approved by courts in 2007. The federal government entered into negotiations following the Ontario Court of Appeal approval of a class-action lawsuit, by Indian Residential School survivors, against the federal government.

The TRC held events across the country, including 7 large national events between June 2010 and March 2014, two regional events, and 238 days of local hearings in 77 different communities. The TRC was inspired and guided largely by traditional Indigenous knowledge and practice. For example, the Anishinaabe Seven Grandfather Teachings – Respect, Courage, Love, Truth, Humility, Honesty, and Wisdom – were used as the themes for the seven National Events. In addition, ceremony and traditional observance were important aspects of the National Events.

THE INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL (IRS) SYSTEM:

The IRS system, in operation for well over a century, was a cornerstone in the Canadian government's colonization and assimilation efforts. Funded by the federal government and run in partnership with many Churches, the IRS system resulted in the mass removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities. Children were transported to boarding schools, often very far from their homes, where they were taught to be ashamed of their families, knowledge, language, and cultures, and where many faced terrible abuse at the hands of school staff. The last of these schools did not close until the 1990s.

"AN ATTACK ON ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES" WITH INTERGENERATIONAL EFFECTS:

The IRS system operationalized racist beliefs that Aboriginal children were better off removed from homes and communities. Ruptured family and community ties, compounded by trauma inflicted at schools, negatively impacted the future parenting capacities of many students. (p. 185)

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS AS CHILD WELFARE

INSTITUTIONS: Starting in the 1940s, residential schools were increasingly used as orphanages and child welfare facilities, yet they were neither funded nor operated in a manner that responded to the needs of children (pp. 71-72).

THE “SIXTIES SCOOP”: CONTINUED INSTITUTIONALIZATION: The TRC suggests that the “Sixties Scoop” (the sharp increase in the number of Aboriginal children apprehended by child welfare institutions starting in the 1960s) can be seen as a transfer of children from one type of institution to another. As residential schools started to close in the 1970s, the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in child welfare care became stark: in 1977, 44% of children in care in Alberta, 51% in Saskatchewan, and 60% in Manitoba, were Aboriginal (p. 73).

CONTINUED ASSIMILATION THROUGH CHILD WELFARE: Aboriginal children are alarmingly overrepresented in child welfare apprehension rates today. A 2011 Statistics Canada study found that 3.6% of all First Nations children under the age of 15 were in foster care, compared to 0.3% of non-Aboriginal children of the same age range. These rates can be traced to the traumas of the IRS and Sixties Scoop, combined with racist attitudes and “a tendency to see Aboriginal poverty as a symptom of neglect, rather than as a consequence of failed government policies.” (p. 186)

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE: Underfunding and jurisdictional disputes are two issues highlighted by the TRC as posing barriers to effective child welfare services today. While tentative research findings suggest that “First Nation agencies are more effective than non-Aboriginal agencies in providing service to First Nation clients,” they are in need of increased funding to develop culturally appropriate services (p. 189). Another challenge highlighted by the TRC is the contested nature of jurisdictional responsibility for Aboriginal child welfare (p. 190). The TRC also emphasizes that meaningful change requires focusing on social determinants that may fall outside narrowly-defined child welfare mandates.

Why did the TRC issue a Summary Report and Calls to Action?

One of the specific tasks the TRC was mandated with was the production of a report to be submitted to the Parties of the Agreement which would include:

- recommendations directed at the Government of Canada concerning the IRS system, experience, and legacy, and any further recommendations deemed necessary by the TRC (the TRC decided to issue these as Calls to Action);
- information on “the history, purpose, operation and supervision of the IRS system, the effect and consequences of IRS (including systemic harms, intergenerational consequences and the impact on human dignity) and the ongoing legacy of the residential schools.”

IRS ONLY ONE PART OF COLONIZATION AND CULTURAL GENOCIDE:

The racist attitudes that informed the IRS system have operated at many levels of political life and across Canadian society. The IRS system stands as one of the most blatant indications of a relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canada that has for far-too-long been characterized by disrespect, violence, and domination. (p. 134)

What calls to action does the TRC make regarding child welfare?

The first five Calls to Action issued by the TRC relate directly to child welfare. They are reproduced here in their entirety:

- 1) We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to commit to reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care by:**
 - i. Monitoring and assessing neglect investigations.
 - ii. Providing adequate resources to enable Aboriginal communities and child welfare organizations to keep Aboriginal families together where it is safe to do so, and to keep children in culturally appropriate environments, regardless of where they reside.
 - iii. Ensuring that social workers and others who conduct child welfare investigations are properly educated and trained about the history and impacts of residential schools.
 - iv. Ensuring that social workers and others who conduct child welfare investigations are properly educated and trained about the potential for Aboriginal communities and families to provide more appropriate solutions to family healing.
 - v. Requiring that all child welfare decision makers consider the impact of the residential school experience on children and their caregivers. (p. 187)
- 2) We call upon the federal government, in collaboration with the provinces and territories, to prepare and publish annual reports on the number of Aboriginal children (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) who are in care, compared with non-Aboriginal children, as well as the reasons for apprehension, the total spending on preventive and care services by child welfare agencies, and the effectiveness of various interventions. (p. 188)**
- 3) We call upon all levels of government to fully implement Jordan's Principle. (p. 190)**
- 4) We call upon the federal government to enact Aboriginal child welfare legislation that establishes national standards for Aboriginal child apprehension and custody cases and includes principles that:**
 - i. Affirm the right of Aboriginal governments to establish and maintain their own child welfare agencies.
 - ii. Require all child welfare agencies and courts to take the residential school legacy into account in their decision making.
 - iii. Establish, as an important priority, a requirement that placements of Aboriginal children into temporary and permanent care be culturally appropriate. (p. 191)
- 5) We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate parenting programs for Aboriginal families. (p. 192)**

What are the TRC report and Calls to Action based on?

The report and its Calls to Action are based on a review of historical documents, university research, analysis of current policies and trends, as well as testimony from residential school survivors, family members of survivors, and former staff. In total, over 6,750 people have given recorded statements to the TRC as part of its truth-gathering efforts.

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